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MEET—THE TIGER!

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LESLIE CHARTERIS

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MEET—THE TIGER!

BY

LESLIE CHARTERIS

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE PILL BOX	1
II	THE NATURALIST	16
III	A LITTLE MELODRAMA	30
IV	A SOCIAL EVENING	44
V	AUNT AGATHA IS UPSET	59
VI	THE KINDNESS OF THE TIGER	75
VII	THE FUN CONTINUES	90
VIII	THE SAINT IS DENSE	105
IX	PATRICIA PERSEVERES	120
X	THE OLD HOUSE	132
XI	CARN LISTENS IN	149
XII	TEA WITH LAPPING	166
XIII	THE BRAND	180
XIV	CAPTAIN PATRICIA	193
XV	SPURS FOR ALGY	210
XVI	IN THE SWIM	222
XVII	PIRACY	240
XVIII	THE SAINT RETURNS	259
XIX	THE TIGER	271
XX	THE LAST LAUGH	288

MEET—THE TIGER!

Chapter I

THE PILL BOX

BAYCOMBE is a village on the North Devon coast that is so isolated from civilization that even at the height of the summer holiday season it is neglected by the rush of lean and plump, tall and short, papas, mammas, and infants. Consequently, there was some sort of excuse for a man who had taken up his dwelling there falling into the monotony of regular habits—even for a man who had only lived there for three days—even (let the worst be known) for a man so unconventional as Simon Templar.

It was not so very long after Simon Templar had settled down in Baycombe that that peacefully sedate village became most unsettled, and things began to happen there that shocked and flabbergasted its peacefully sedate inhabitants, as will be related; but at first Simon Templar found Baycombe as dull as it had been for the last six hundred years.

Simon Templar—in some parts of the world he was quite well known, from his initials, as the Saint—was a man of twenty-seven, tall, dark, keen faced, deeply tanned, blue eyed. That is a rough description. It was not long before Baycombe had observed him more closely, and woven mysterious legends about him. Baycombe did that within the first two days of his arrival, and it must be admitted that he had given some grounds for speculation.

The house he lived in (it may perhaps be dignified with the title of "house," since a gang of workmen from Ilfracombe had worked without rest for thirty-six hours to make it habitable) had been built during the war as a coast defence station, at a time when the War Office were vaguely alarmed by rumours of a projected invasion at some unlikely point. Possibly because they thought Baycombe was the last point at which any enemy strategist would expect them to look for an invasion, the War Office had erected a kind of Pill Box on the tor above the village. The work had been efficiently carried out, and a small garrison had been installed; but apparently the War Office had been cleverer than the German tacticians, for no attempt was made to land an army at Baycombe. In 1918 the garrison and the guns had been removed, and the miniature concrete fortress had been abandoned to the games of the local children until Simon Templar, by some means known only to himself, had discovered that the Pill Box and the quarter of a square mile of land in which it stood were still the property of the War Office, and in some secret way had managed to persuade the said War Office to sell him the freehold for twenty-five pounds.

In this curious home the Saint had installed himself, together with a retainer who went by the name of Orace. And the Saint had been so overcome with the dullness of Baycombe that within three days he was the victim of routine.

At 9 A. M. on this third day (the Saint had a rooted objection to early rising) the man who went by the name of Orace entered his master's bedroom bearing a cup of tea and mug of hot water.

"Nice morning, sir," said Orace, and retired.

Orace had remarked on the niceness of the morning for the last eight years, and he had never allowed the weather to change his pleasant custom.

The Saint yawned, stretched himself like a cat, and saw with half-closed eyes that a stream of sunlight was pouring in through the embrasure which did duty for a window. The optimism of Orace being justified, Simon Templar sighed, stretched himself again, and after a moment's indecision leaped out of bed. He shaved rapidly, sipping his tea in between whiles, and then pulled on a bathing costume and went out into the sun, picking up a length of rope on his way out. He skipped energetically on the grass outside for fifteen minutes. Then he shadow-boxed for five minutes. Then he grabbed a towel, knotted it loosely round his neck, sprinted the couple of dozen yards that lay between the Pill Box and the edge of the cliff, and coolly swung himself over the edge. A hundred and fifty foot drop lay beneath him, but handholds were plentiful, and he descended to the beach as nonchalantly as he would have descended a flight of stairs. The water was ripplingly calm. He covered a quarter of a mile at racing speed, turned on his back and paddled lazily shoreward, finishing the last hundred yards like a champion. Then he lay at the edge of the surf, basking in the strengthening sun.

All these things he had done as regularly on the two previous mornings, and he was languidly pondering the deadliness of regular habits when the thing happened that proved to him quite conclusively that regular habits could be more literally deadly than he had allowed for.

Phhhew-wuk!

Something sang past his ear, and the pebble at which he had been staring in an absent-minded sort of way

leaped sideways and was left with a silvery streak scored across it, while the thing that had sung changed its note and went whining seaward.

"Bad luck, sonny," murmured the Saint mildly. "Only a couple of inches out. . . ."

But he was on his feet before the sound of the shot had reached him.

He was on one of the arms of the bay, which was roughly semicircular. The village was in the centre of the arc. A quick calculation told him that the bullet had come from some point on the cliff between the Pill Box and the village, but he could see nothing on the skyline. A moment later a frantic silhouette appeared at the top of the tor, and the voice of Orace hailed down an anxious query. The Saint waved his towel in response and, making for the foot of the cliff, began to climb up again.

He accomplished the difficult ascent with no apparent effort, quite unperturbed by the thought that the unknown sniper might essay a second round. And presently the Saint stood on the grass above, hands on hips, gazing keenly down the slope toward the spot from where the bullet had seemed to come. A quarter of a mile away was a broad clump of low bushes; beyond the copse, he knew, was a cart track leading down to the village. The Saint shrugged and turned to Orace, who had been fuming and fidgeting around him.

"The Tiger knows his stuff," remarked Simon Templar with a kind of admiration.

"Like a greenorn!" spluttered Orace. "Like a namachoor! Wa did ja expect? An' just wotcha deserved—an' I 'ope it learns ya! You ain't 'urt, sir, are ye?" added Orace, succumbing to human sympathy.

"No—but near enough," said the Saint.

Orace flung out his arms.

"Pity he didn't plug ya one, just ter make ya more careful nex' time. I'd a bin grateful to 'im. An' if I ever lay my 'ands on the swine 'e's fore it," concluded Orace somewhat illogically, and strutted back to the Pill Box.

Orace, as a Sergeant of Marines, had received a German bullet in his right hip at Zeebrugge, and had walked with a lop-sided strut ever since.

"Brekfuss in narf a minnit," Orace flung over his shoulder.

The Saint strolled after him at a leisurely pace and returned to his bedroom whistling. Nevertheless, Orace, entering the sitting room with a tray precisely half a minute later, found the Saint stretched out in an armchair. The Saint's hair was impeccably brushed, and he was fully dressed—according to the Saint's ideas of full dress—in shoes, socks, a dilapidated pair of gray flannel trousers and a snowy silk tennis shirt. Orace snorted, and the Saint smiled.

"Orace," said the Saint conversationally, lifting the cover from a plate of bacon and eggs, "one gathers that things are just about to hum."

"'Um," responded Orace.

"About to 'um, if you prefer it," said the Saint equably. "The point is that the orchestra are in their places, the noises off have hitched up their hosiery, the conductor has unkemped his hair, the seconds are getting out of the ring, the guard is blowing his whistle, the skipper has rung down for full steam ahead, the —the——"

"The cawfy's getting cold," said Orace.

The Saint buttered a triangle of toast.

"How unsympathetic you are, Orace!" he complained. "Well, if my flights of metaphor fail to impress you, let us put it like this: we're off."

"'Um," agreed Orace, and returned to the improvised kitchen.

Simon finished his meal and returned to the armchair, from which he had a view of the cliff and the sea beyond. He skimmed through the previous day's paper (Baycombe was at least twenty-four hours behind the rest of England) and then smoked a meditative cigarette. At length he rose, fetched and pulled on a well-worn tweed coat, picked up an unwieldy walking stick, and went to the curtained breach in the fortifications which was used for a front door.

"Orace!"

"Sir!" answered Orace, appearing at the threshold of the kitchen.

"I'm going to have a look round. I'll be back for lunch."

"Aye, aye, sir. . . . Sir!"

The Saint was turning away, and he stopped. Orace fumbled under his apron and produced a fearsome weapon—a revolver of pre-war make and enormous calibre—which he offered to his master.

"It ain't much ter look at," said Orace, stroking the barrel lovingly, "and I wouldn't use it fer fancy shooting; but it'll make a bigger 'ole in a man than any o' those pretty ortymatics."

"Thanks," grinned the Saint. "But it makes too much noise. I prefer Anna."

"'Um," said Orace.

Orace could put any shade of meaning into that simple monosyllable and on this occasion there was no

doubt about the precise shade of meaning he intended to convey.

The Saint was studying a slim blade which he had taken from a sheath strapped to his forearm, hidden under his sleeve. The knife was about six inches long in the blade, which was leaf-shaped and slightly curved. The haft was scarcely three inches long, of beautifully carved ivory. The whole was so perfectly balanced that it seemed to take life from the hand that held it, and its edge was so keen that a man could have shaved with it. The Saint spun the sliver of steel high in the air and caught it adroitly by the hilt as it fell back; and in the same movement he returned it to its sheath with such speed that the knife seemed to vanish even as he touched it.

"Don't you be rude about Anna," said the Saint, wagging a reproving forefinger. "She'd take a man's thumb off before the gun was half out of his pocket."

And he went striding down the hill toward the village, leaving Orace to pessimistic disgust.

It was early summer, and pleasantly warm—a fact which made the Saint's selection of the Pill Box for a home less absurd than it would have seemed in winter. (There was another reason for his choice, besides a desire for quantities of fresh air and the simple life, as will be seen.) The Saint whistled as he walked, swinging his heavy stick, but his eyes never relaxed their vigilant study of every scrap of cover that might hide another sniper. He walked boldly down to the bushes which he had suspected that morning and spent some time in a minute search for incriminating evidence; but there had been no rain for days, and even his practised eye could make little of the spoor he

found. Near the edge of the cliff he caught a golden gleam under a tuft of grass, and found a cartridge case.

"Three-one-five Mauser," commented the Saint. "Naughty, naughty!"

He dropped the shell into his pocket and studied the ground closely, but the indistinct impressions gave him no clue to the size or shape of the unknown, and at last he resumed his thoughtful progress toward the village.

Baycombe, which is really no more than a fishing village, lies barely above sea level, but on either side the red cliffs rise away from the harbour, and the hills rise behind, so that Baycombe lies in a hollow opening on the Bristol Channel. Facing seaward from the harbour, the Pill Box would have been seen crowning the tor on the right, the only building to the east for some ten miles; the tor on the left was some fifty feet lower and was dotted with half-a-dozen red brick and gray stone houses belonging to the aristocracy. The Saint, via Orace, who had drunk beer in the public house by the quay to some advantage, already knew the names and habits of this oligarchy. The richest member was one Hans Bloem, a Boer of about fifty, who was also reputed to be the meanest man in Devonshire. Bloem frequently had a nephew staying with him who was as popular as his uncle was unpopular: the nephew was Algernon de Breton Lomas-Coper, wore a monocle, was one of the Lads, and highly esteemed locally for a very pleasant ass. The Best People were represented by Sir Michael Lapping, a retired Judge; the Proletariat by Sir John Bittle, a retired Wholesale Grocer. There was a Manor, but it had no Lord, for it had passed to a gaunt, grim, masculine lady, Miss Agatha

Girton, who lived there, unhonoured and unloved, with her ward, whom the village honoured and loved without exception. For the rest, there were two Indian Civil Servants who, under the prosaic names of Smith and Shaw, survived on their pensions in a tiny bungalow; and a Dr. Carn.

"A very dull and ordinary bunch," reflected Simon Templar, as he stood on the top of the village street pondering his next move. "Except, perhaps, the ward. Is she the luvverly 'eroine of this blinkin' adventure?"

This hopeful thought directed his steps toward the Blue Moon, which was at the same time Baycombe's club and pub. But the Saint did not reach the Blue Moon that morning, because as he passed the shop which supplied all the village requirements, from shoes to ships and sealing wax, a girl came out.

"I'm so sorry," said the Saint, steadying her with one arm.

He retrieved the parcel which the collision had knocked out of her hand, and in returning it to her he had the chance of observing her face more closely. He could find no flaw there, and she had the most delightful of smiles. Her head barely topped his shoulder.

"You must be the ward," said Simon. "Miss Pat—the village doesn't give you a surname."

She nodded.

"Patricia Holm," she said. "And you must be the Mystery Man."

"Not really—am I that already?" said the Saint with interest, and she saw at once that the desire to hide his light under a bushel was not one of his failings.

It is always a question whether the man inspires

the nickname or the nickname inspires the man. When a man is known to his familiars as "Beau" or "Rabbit" there is little difficulty in supplying the answer; but a man who is called "Saint" may be either a lion or a lamb. It is doubtful whether Simon Templar would have been as proud of his title as he was if he had not found that it provided him with a ready-made, effective, and useful pose; for the Saint was pleasantly egotistical.

"There are the most weird and wonderful rumours," said the girl, and the Saint looked milder than ever.

"You must tell me," he said.

He had fallen into step beside her, and they were walking up the rough road that led to the houses on the West Tor.

"I'm afraid we've been very inhospitable," she said frankly. "You see, you set up house in the Pill Box, and that left everybody wondering whether you were possible or impossible. Baycombe society is awfully exclusive."

"I'm flattered," said the Saint. "Accordingly, after seeing you home, I shall return to the Pill Box and sit down to consider whether Baycombe society is possible or impossible."

She laughed.

"You're a most refreshing relief," she told him. "Baycombe is full of inferiority complexes."

"Fortunately," remarked Simon gently, "I don't wear hats."

Presently she said:

"What brings you to this benighted spot?"

"A craving for excitement and adventure," an-

swered the Saint promptly—"reënforced by an ambition to be horribly wealthy."

She looked at him with a quick frown, but his face confirmed the innocence of sarcasm which had given a surprising twist to his words.

"I shouldn't have thought anyone would have come here for that," she said.

"On the contrary," said the Saint genially, "I should have no hesitation in recommending this particular spot to any qualified adventurer as one of the few places left in England where battle, murder, and sudden death may be quite commonplace events."

"I've lived here, on and off, since I was twelve, and the most exciting thing I can remember is a house on fire," she argued, still possessed of an uneasy feeling that he was making fun of her.

"Then you'll really appreciate the rough stuff when it does begin," murmured Simon cheerfully, and swung his stick, whistling.

They reached the Manor (it was not an imposing building, but it had a homely air) and the girl held out her hand.

"Won't you come in?"

The Saint was no laggard.

"I'd love to."

She took him into a sombre but airy drawing room, finely furnished; but the Saint was never self-conscious. The contrast of his rough, serviceable clothes with the delicate brocaded upholstery did not impress him, and he accepted a seat without any appearance of doubting its ability to support his weight.

"May I fetch my aunt?" asked Miss Holm. "I know she'd like to meet you."

"But of course," assented the Saint, smiling, and she was left with a sneaking suspicion that he was agreeing with her second sentence as much as with her first.

Miss Girton arrived in a few moments, and Simon knew at once that Baycombe had not exaggerated her grimness. "A norrer," Orace had reported, and the Saint felt inclined to agree. Miss Girton was stocky and as broad as a man: he was surprised at the strength of her grip when she shook hands with him. Her face was weatherbeaten. She wore a shirt and tie and a coarse tweed skirt, woollen stockings, and heavy flat-heeled shoes. Her hair was cropped.

"I was wondering when I should meet you," she said immediately. "You must come to dinner and meet some people. I'm afraid the company's very limited here."

"I'm afraid I'm prepared for very little company," said Templar. "I'd decided to forget dress clothes for a while."

"Lunch, then. Would you like to stay to-day?"

"May I be excused? Don't think me uncivil, but I promised my man I'd be back for lunch. If I don't turn up," explained the Saint ingenuously, "Orace would think something had happened to me, and he'd go cruising round with his revolver, and somebody might get hurt."

There was an awkward hiatus in the conversation at that point, but it was confined to two of the party, for Templar was admiring a fine specimen of Venetian glass and did not seem to realize that he had said anything unusual. The girl hastened into the breach.

"Mr. Templar has come here for adventure," she said, and Miss Girton stared.

"Well, I wish him luck," she said shortly. "On Fri-

day, then, Mr. Templar? I'll ask some people. . . ."

"Delighted," murmured the Saint, bowing, and now there was something faintly mocking about his smile. "On the whole, I don't see why the social amenities shouldn't be observed, even in a vendetta."

Miss Girton excused herself soon after, and the Saint smoked a cigarette and chatted lightly and easily with Patricia Holm. He was an entertaining talker, and he did not introduce any more dark and horrific allusions into his remarks. Nevertheless, he caught the girl looking at him from time to time with a kind of mixture of perplexity, apprehension, and interest, and was hugely delighted.

At last he rose to go, and she accompanied him to the gate.

"You seem quite sane," she said bluntly as they went down the path. "What was the idea of talking all that rot?"

He looked down at her, his eyes dancing.

"All my life," he replied, "I have told the truth. It is a great advantage, because if you do that nobody ever takes you seriously."

"But talking about murders and revolvers——"

"Perhaps," said the Saint, with that mocking smile, "it will increase the prominence of the part which I hope to play in your thoughts from now onward if I tell you that from this morning the most strenuous efforts will be made to kill me. On the other hand, of course, I shall not be killed, so you mustn't worry too much about me. I mean, don't go off your feed or lie awake all night or anything like that."

"I'll try not to," she said lightly.

"You don't believe me," accused Templar sternly.

She hesitated.

"Well——"

"One day," said the Saint severely, "you will apologize for your unbelief."

He gave her a stiff bow and marched away so abruptly that she gasped.

It was exactly one o'clock when he arrived home at the Pill Box, and Orace was flustered and disapproving.

"If ya' 'adn't bin 'ome punctual," said Orace, "I'd 'a' bin out looking fer yer corpse. It ain't fair ter give a man such a lotta worry. Yer so careless I wonder the Tiger 'asn't putcha out 'arf a dozen times."

"I've met the most wonderful girl in the world," said Simon impenitently. "By all the laws of adventure, I'm bound to have to save her life two or three times during the next ten days. I shall kiss her very passionately in the last chapter. We shall be married——"

Orace snorted.

"Lunch 'narf a minnit," he said, and disappeared.

The Saint washed his hands and ran a comb through his hair in the half-minute's grace allowed him; and the Saint was thoughtful. He had his full measure of human vanity, and it tickled his sense of humour to enter the lists with the air of a Mystery Man straight out of a detective story, but he had a solid reason for giving his caprice its head. It struck him that the Tiger knew all about him and that therefore no useful purpose would be served by trying to pretend innocence; whereas a shameless bravado might well bother the other side considerably. They would be racking their brains to find some reason for his brazen front,

and crediting him with the most complicated subtleties: when all the time there was nothing behind it but the fact that one pose was as good as another, and the opportunity to play the swashbuckler was too good to be missed.

The Saint was whistling blithely when Orace brought lunch. He knew that the Tiger was in Baycombe. He had come halfway across the world to rob the Tiger of a million dollars, and the duel promised to be exhilarating as anything in the Saint's hell-for-leather past.

Chapter II

THE NATURALIST

ALGERNON DE BRETON LOMAS-COPER was one of the genial Algys made famous by Mr. P. G. Wodehouse, and accordingly he often ejaculated "What? What?" to show that he could hardly believe his own brilliance; but now he ejaculated "What? What?" to show that he could hardly believe his own ears.

"It's perfectly true," said Patricia. "And he's coming to lunch."

"Now!" gasped Algy feebly, and relapsed into open-mouthed amazement.

He was one of those men who are little changed by the passage of time: he might have been twenty-five or thirty-five. Studying him very closely—which few took the trouble to do—one gathered that the latter age was more probably right. He was fair, round-faced, pink-and-white.

"He was quite tame," said Patricia. "In fact, I thought he was awfully nice. But he would keep on talking about the terrifying things that he thought were going to happen. He said people were trying to murder him."

"Dementia persecutoria," opined Algy. "What?"

The girl shook her head.

"He was as sane as anyone I've ever met."

"Extensio cruris paranoia?" suggested Algy sagely.

"What on earth's that?" she asked.

"An irresistible desire to pull legs."

Patricia frowned.

"You'll be thinking I'm crazy next," she said. "But somehow you can't help believing him. It's as if he were daring you to take him seriously."

"Well, if he manages to wake up this backwater I'll be grateful to him," said the man. "Are you going to invite me to stay and meet the ogre?"

He stayed.

Toward one o'clock Patricia sighted Templar coming up the road, and went out to meet him at the gate. He was dressed as he had been the day before, but he had fastened his collar and put on a tie.

He greeted her with a smile.

"Still alive, you see," he remarked. "The ungodly prowled around last night, but I poured a bucket of water over him, and he went home. It's astonishing how easy it is to damp the ardour of an assassin."

"Isn't that getting a bit stale?" she protested, although she was annoyed to find that the reproof she forced into her tone lacked conviction.

"I'm surprised you should say that," he returned gravely. "Personally, I'm only just beginning to appreciate the true succulence of the jest."

"At least, I hope you won't upset everybody at lunch," she said, and his eyes twinkled.

"I'll try to behave," he promised. "At any other time it would have been a fearful effort, but to-day I'm on my party manners."

There were cocktails in the drawing room (Baycombe society prided itself on being up to date), and there Algy was brought forward and introduced.

"Delighted—delighted—long-expected pleasure—what?" he babbled.

"Is it really?" asked the Saint guilelessly.

Algy screwed a pane of glass into his eye and surveyed the visitor with awe.

"So you're the Mystery Man!" he prattled on. "You don't mind being called that? I'm sure you won't. Everybody calls you the Mystery Man, and I honestly think it suits you most awfully well, don't you know. And fancy taking the Pill Box! Isn't it too frightfully draughty? But of course you're one of these strong, hearty he-men we see in the pictures."

"Algy, you're being rude," interrupted the girl.

"Am I really? Only meant for good-fellowship and all that sort of thing. What? What? No offence, old banana pip, you know, don't you know."

"Do I? Don't I?" asked the Saint, blinking.

The girl rushed into the pause, for she already had a good estimate of the Saint's perverse sense of fun, and dreaded its irresponsibility. She felt that at any moment he would produce a revolver and ask if they knew anyone worth murdering.

"Algy, be an angel and go and tell Aunt Agatha to hurry up."

"That is Mynheer Hans Bloem's nephew," observed the Saint calmly as the door closed behind the talkative one. "He is thirty-four. He lived for some years in America; in the City of London he is known as a man with mining property in the Transvaal."

Patricia was astonished.

"You know more about him than I do," she said.

"I make it my business to pry into my neighbours'

affairs," he answered solemnly. "It mayn't be courteous, but it's cautious."

"Perhaps you know all about me?" she was tempted to challenge him.

He turned on her a clear blue eye which held a mocking gleam.

"Only the unimportant things. That you were educated at Mayfield. That Miss Girton isn't your aunt, but a very distant cousin. That you've led a very quiet life, and travelled very little. You're dependent on Miss Girton, because she has the administration of your property until you're twenty-five. That is for another five years."

"Are you aware," she demanded dangerously, "that you're most impertinent?"

He nodded.

"Quite unpardonably," he admitted. "I can only plead in excuse that when there's a price on one's head one can't be too particular about one's acquaintances."

And he looked meditatively at the yellow-golden contents of his glass, which he had held untasted since it was given him.

"Your health," he wished her; and, as he set down the empty glass, he smiled and added: "At least I've no fear of you."

She had no time to find an adequate answer before Algy returned with Miss Girton and a tall, thin, leather-faced man who was introduced as Mr. Bloem.

"Pleased to meet you," murmured the Saint. "So sorry T. T. Deeps are going badly in the market, but this is just the time to make your corner."

Bloem started, and his spectacles fell off and dan-

gled at the length of their black watered ribbon as the Boer stared blankly at Simon Templar.

"You must be very much on the inside in the City, Mr. Templar," said Bloem.

"Extraordinary, isn't it?" agreed Simon, with his most saintly smile.

Then he was being introduced to a new arrival, Sir Michael Lapping. The ex-judge shook hands heartily, peering short-sightedly into the Saint's face.

"You remind me of a man I once met in the Old Bailey—and I'm hanged if I can remember whether it was a professional encounter or not."

"I was just going to," said the Saint blandly, if a trifle cryptically. "His name was Harry the Duke, and you gave him seven years. He escaped abroad six years ago, but I hear he's been back in England some months. Be careful how you go out after dark."

It should have fallen to the Saint to take Miss Girton in to lunch, but his hostess passed him on to Patricia, and the girl was thus able to get a word with him aside.

"You've already broken your promise twice," she said. "Do you have to go on like this?"

"I'm merely attracting attention," he said. "Having now become the centre of interest, I shall rest on my laurels."

He was as good as his word, but Patricia was unreasonably irritated to observe that he had succeeded in attaining his shamelessly confessed object. The others of the party felt vaguely at a disadvantage, and favoured the Saint with furtive glances in which was betrayed not a little superstitious awe. Once the Saint caught Patricia's eye, and the silent mirth that was

always bubbling up behind his eyes spread for a moment into an open grin. She frowned and tossed her pretty head, and entered upon an earnest discussion with Lapping; but when she stole a look at the Saint to see how he had taken the snub she saw that beneath his dutifully decorous demeanour he was shaking with silent laughter, and she was furious.

The Saint had travelled. He talked interestingly—if with a strong egotistical bias—about places as far removed from civilization and from each other as Vladivostok, Armenia, Moscow, Lapland, Chungking, Pernambuco, and Sierra Leone. There seemed to be few of the wilder parts of the world which he had not visited, and few of those in which he had not had adventures. He had won a gold rush in South Africa and lost his holding in a poker game twenty-four hours later. He had run guns into China, whisky into the United States, and perfume into England. He had deserted after a year in the Spanish Foreign Legion. He had worked his passage across the Atlantic as a steward, tramped across America, fought his way across Mexico during a free-for-all revolution, picked up a couple of thousand pounds in the Argentine, and sailed home from Buenos Aires in a millionaire's suite—to lose nearly all the fruit of his wanderings on Epsom Downs.

"You'll find Baycombe very dull after such an exciting life," said Miss Girton.

"Somehow, I don't agree," said the Saint. "I find the air very bracing."

Bloem adjusted his spectacles and inquired:

"And what might your employment be at the moment?"

"Just now," said the Saint suavely, "I'm looking for a million dollars. I feel that I should like to end my days in luxury, and I can't get along on less than fifteen thousand a year."

Algy squawked with merriment.

"Haw-haw!" he yapped. "Jolly good! Too awfully horribly priceless! What? What?"

"Quite," the Saint concurred modestly.

"I fear," said Lapping, "that you will hardly find your million dollars in Baycombe."

The Saint put his hands on the tablecloth and studied his fingernails with a gentle smile.

"You depress me, Sir Michael," he remarked. "And I was feeling very optimistic. I was told that there was a million dollars to be picked up here, and one can hardly disbelieve the word of a dying man, especially when one has tried to save his life. It was at a place called Ayer Pahit, in the Malay States. He'd taken to the jungle—they'd hunted him through every town in the Peninsula, ever since they located him settling down in Singapore to enjoy an unjust share of the loot—and one of their Malay trackers had caught him and stuck a kris in him. I found him just before he passed out, and he told me most of the story. . . . But I'm boring you."

"Not a bit, dear old sprout, not a bit!" rejoined Algy eagerly, and he was supported by a chorus of curiosity.

The Saint shook his head.

"But I'm quite certain I shall bore you if I go on," he stated obstinately. "Now suppose I'd been talking about Brazil—did you know there was a village behind an almost impassable range of hills covered with

thick poisonous jungle where some descendants of Cortes' crowd still live? They're gradually being absorbed into native stock—Mayas—by intermarriage, but they still wear swords and talk good Castilian. They could hardly believe my rifle. I remember . . ."

And it was impossible to wheedle him back to any further discussion of his million dollars.

He made his excuses as soon after coffee as was decently possible, and spoke last to Patricia.

"When you get to know me better—as you must—you'll learn to forgive my weakness."

"I suppose it's nothing but a silly desire to cause a sensation," she said coldly.

"Nothing but that," said the Saint with disarming frankness, and went home with a comfortable feeling that he had had the better of the exchange.

In spite of the protestations of Orace, he took a walk during the afternoon. He wanted to be familiar with the territory for some distance around, and thus his route took him inland toward the uplands which sheltered the village on the south. It was the first time he had surveyed the ground, but his hunting experience had given him a good eye for country, and at the end of three hours' hard tramping he had every detail of the district mapped in his brain.

It was on the homeward hike that he met the stranger. His walk had been as solitary as a walk in North Devon can be: he had not even encountered any farm labourers, for the land for miles around was unclaimed moor. But this man was so obviously harmless, even at a distance of half a mile, that the Saint frowned thoughtfully.

The man was in plus-fours of a dazzling purple hue.

He had a kind of haversack slung over his shoulder, and he carried a butterfly net. He moved aimlessly about—sometimes in short violent rushes, sometimes walking, sometimes crawling and rooting about on his hands and knees. He did not seem to notice Templar at all, and the Saint, moving very silently, came right up and stood over him during an exceptionally zealous burrowing exploration among some gorse bushes. While Simon watched, the naturalist made a sudden pounce, accompanied by a gasp of triumph, and wriggled back into the open with a small beetle held gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. The haversack was hitched round, a matchbox secured, the insect imprisoned therein, and the box carefully stowed away. Then the entomologist rose to his feet, perspiring and very red in the face.

"Good-afternoon, sir," he remarked genially, mopping his brow with an appallingly green silk handkerchief.

"So it is," agreed the Saint.

Mr. Templar had a disconcerting trick of taking the most conventional speech quite literally—a device which he had adopted because it threw the onus of continuing the conversation upon the other party.

"An innocuous and healthy pastime," explained the stranger, with a friendly and all-embracing sweep of his hand. "Fresh air—exercise—and all in the most glorious scenery in England."

He was half a head shorter than the Saint, but a good two stone heavier. His eyes were large and childlike behind a pair of enormous horn-rimmed glasses, and he wore a straggly pale walrus moustache. The sight of this big middle-aged man in the shocking

clothes, with his ridiculous little butterfly net, was as diverting as anything the Saint could remember.

"Of course—you're Dr. Carn," said the Saint, and the other started.

"How did you know?"

"I always seem to be giving people surprises," complained Simon, completely at his ease. "It's so simple. You look less like a doctor than anyone but a doctor could look, and there's only one doctor in Baycombe. How's trade?"

Suddenly Carn was no longer genial.

"My profession?" he said stiffly. "I don't quite understand."

"You are one of many," sighed the Saint. "Nobody ever quite understands me. And I wasn't talking about your new profession, but about your old trade."

Carn looked very closely at the younger man, but Simon was gazing at the sea, and his face was inscrutable except for a faintly mocking twist at the corners of his mouth—a twist that might have meant anything.

"You're clever, Templar——"

"Mr. Templar to the aristocracy, but Saint to you," Simon corrected him benevolently. "Naturally I'm clever. If I wasn't, I'd be dead. And my especial brilliance is an infallible memory for faces."

"You're clever, Templar, but this time you're mistaken, and persisting in your delusion is making you forget your manners."

The Saint favoured Carn with a lazy smile.

"Well, well," he murmured, "to err is human, is it not? But tell me, Dr. Carn, why you allow an automatic pistol to spoil the set of that beautiful coat? Are you

afraid of a scarabæus turning at bay? Or is it that you're scared of a Great White Woolly Wugga-Wugga jumping out of a bush?"

And the Saint swung his heavy staff as though weighing its efficiency as a bludgeon, and the clear blue eyes with that lively devil of mischief glimmering in their depths never left Carn's red face. Carn glared back chokingly.

"Sir," he exploded at length, "let me tell you——"

"I, too, was once an Inspector of Horse Marines to the Swiss Navy," the Saint encouraged him gently; and, when Carn's indignation proved to have become speechless, he added: "But why am I so unsociable? Come along to the Pill Box and have a spot of supper. I'm afraid it'll only be tinned stuff—we stopped having fresh meat since a seagull died after tasting the Sunday joint—but our brandy is Napoleon . . . and Orace grills sardines marvellously. . . ."

He linked his arm in Carn's and urged the naturalist along, chattering irrepressibly. It is an almost incredible tribute to the charm which the Saint could exert, to record that he coaxed Carn into acceptance in three minutes and had him chuckling at a grossly improper limerick by the time they reached the Pill Box.

"You're a card, Templar," said Carn as they sat over Martinis in the sitting room, and the Saint raised indulgent eyebrows.

"Because I called your bluff?"

"Because you didn't hesitate."

"He who hesitates," said the Saint sententiously, "is bossed. No mughopper will ever spiel this baby."

They talked politics and literature through supper (the Saint had original and heretical views on both

subjects) as dispassionately as the most ordinary men, met together in the most ordinary circumstances, might have done.

After Orace had served coffee and withdrawn, Carn produced a cigar case and offered it to the Saint. Templar looked, and shook his head with a smile.

"Not even with you, dear heart," he said, and Carn was aggrieved.

"There's nothing wrong with them."

"I'm so glad you haven't wasted a cigar, then."

"If I give you my word——"

"I'll take it. But I won't take your cigars."

Carn shrugged, took one himself and lighted it. The Saint settled himself more comfortably in his armchair.

"I'm glad to see you don't pack a gun yourself," observed the Doctor presently.

"It makes one so unpopular, letting off artillery and things all over Devonshire," said Simon. "You can only do that in shockers: in real life, the police make all sorts of awkward inquiries if you go slaughtering people here and there because they look cock-eyed at you. But I don't advise anyone to bank on my consideration for the nerves of the neighbourhood when I'm in my own home."

Carn sat forward abruptly.

"We've bluffed for an hour and a half by the clock," he said. "Suppose we get down to brass tacks?"

"I'll suppose anything you like," assented Simon. "I know you've got some funny game on; and I know you aren't one of those dude detectives, because I've made inquiries. You aren't even Secret Service. I know something about your record, and I gather you haven't come to Baycombe because you got an idea you'd like to

vegetate in rural England and grow string beans. You aren't the sort that goes anywhere unless they can see easy money or big trouble waiting for collection."

"I might have decided to quit before I stopped something."

"You might—but your sort doesn't quit while there's a kick left in 'em. Besides, what do you think I've been doing all the time I've been down here?"

"Huntin' the elusive Wugga-Wugga, presumably," drawled the Saint.

Carn made a gesture of impatience.

"I've told you you're clever," he said, "and I meant every letter of it—in capital italics. But you don't have to pretend you think I'm a fool, because I know you know better. You're here for what you can get, and I've a good idea what that is. If I'm right, it's my job to get in your way all I can, unless you work in with me. Templar, I'm paying you the compliment of putting the cards on the table, because from what I hear I'd rather work with you than against you. Now, why can't you come across?"

The Saint had sunk deeper into his armchair. The room was lighted only by the smoky oil lamp that Orace had brought in with the coffee, for the sky had clouded over in the late afternoon and night had come on early.

"There are just one million reasons why I shouldn't come across," said the Saint tranquilly. "They were lost to the Confederated Bank of Chicago quite a time ago, and I want them all to myself, my good Carn."

"You don't imagine you could get away with it?"

"I can think of no limits to my ingenuity in getting away with things," said the Saint calmly.

He moved in the shadows, and a moment later he said quietly:

"There is a million-and-first argument which prevents me coming across just now, Carn—and that is that I never allow Tiger Cubs to listen-in on my confessions."

"What do you mean?" asked Carn.

"I mean," said the Saint in a clear strong voice, "that at this moment there's some son-of-a-gun peeking through that embrasure. I've got him covered, and if he so much as blinks I'm going to shoot his eyelids off!"

Chapter III

A LITTLE MELODRAMA

CARN sprang to his feet, his hand flying to his hip, and the Saint laughed softly.

"He's gone," Templar said. "He ducked as soon as I spoke. But maybe now you realize how hard it is not to be killed when someone's really out for your blood. It looks so easy in stories, but I'm finding it a bit of a strain."

The Saint was talking in his usual mild, leisurely way, but there was nothing leisurely about his movements. He had turned out the lamp at the same instant as Carn had jumped up, and his words came from the direction of the embrasure.

"Can't see anything. This bunch are as windy as mice trying to nibble a cat's whiskers. I'll take a look outside. Stay right where you are, sonny."

Carn heard the Saint slither out, and there were words in the kitchen. A few seconds later Orace came in, bearing a lighted candle and clasping his beloved blunderbuss in his free hand. Orace did not speak. He set the candle down in a corner, so that the light did not interfere with his view of the embrasure, and waited patiently with the enormous revolver cocked and at the ready.

"You have an exciting life," remarked Carn, and

Orace turned an unfriendly eye—and the revolver—upon the Doctor.

"'Um," said Orace noncommittally.

The Saint was back in ten minutes by the clock.

"Bad huntin'," he murmured. "It's as black as coffee outside, and he must have hared for home as soon as I scared him. . . . Beer, Orace."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the silent one, and faded out as grimly as he had entered.

Carn gazed thoughtfully after the retreating figure with its preposterous armoury and its preposterous strut.

"Any more in the menagerie?" he inquired.

"Nope," said the Saint laconically.

He was relighting the lamp, and the flare of the match threw his face into high relief for an instant. Carn became more thoughtful. His life had been devoted to dealing with men of all sorts and conditions. He had known many clever men, not a few dangerous men, and a number of mysterious men, but at that moment he wondered if he had ever met a man who looked more cleverly and dangerously and mysteriously competent to deal with any kind of trouble that happened to be floating around.

"I'd rather have you on my side than against me, Saint," said Carn. "You'd get a rake-off. Think it over."

Hands on hips, the Saint regarded the red-faced man quizzically.

"Can I take that as official?"

"Naturally not. But you can take it from me that it can be arranged on the side."

"Thanks," said the Saint. "I don't feel impressed

with your balance sheet. Taken by and large, the dividend don't seem fat enough to tempt this investor. Now try this one: come in with me, and I'll promise you one third. Think it over, Detective Inspector Carn."

"Dr. Carn."

The Saint smiled.

"Need we keep it up?" he asked smoothly. "What on earth, dear lamb, did you think you were getting away with?"

Carn wrinkled his nose.

"Just as you like," he agreed. "You have the advantage of me, though. I'm hanged if I can place you."

"That's the best news I've heard for some time," said the Saint cheerfully.

Carn rose to go after a couple of pints of beer had vanished, and Templar rose also.

"Better let me see you home," said the Saint. "I'll feel safer."

"If you think I need nursing," began Carn with some heat, but Simon linked his arm in that of the detective with his most charming smile.

"Not a bit. I'd enjoy the stroll."

Carn was living in a miniature house the grounds of which backed on the larger grounds of the Manor. Templar had already noticed the house, and wondered to whom it belonged; and for some unaccountable reason, which he could only blame on his melodramatic imagination, he felt relieved at the news that Patricia had a real live detective within call.

On the walk, the Saint learned that Carn had been on the spot for three months. Carn was prepared to be loquacious up to a point: but beyond that limit he could

not be lured. Carn was also prepared to talk about the Saint—a fact which pleased Simon's egotism without hypnotizing his caution.

"I think it should be an interesting duel," Carn said.

"I hope so," agreed Templar politely.

"The more so because you are the second most confident crook I've ever met."

The Saint's white teeth flashed.

"You're premature," he protested. "My crime is not yet committed. Already an idea is sizzling in my brain which might easily save me the trouble of running against the law at all. I'll write my solicitor tomorrow and let you know."

He declined Carn's invitation to come in for a doch-an-dorris, and, saying good-bye at the door, set off briskly in the general direction of the Pill Box.

This expedition, however, lasted only for so long as he judged that Carn, if he were curious, would have been able to hear the departing footsteps. At that point the Saint stepped neatly off the road on to the grass at the side and retraced his steps, moving like a lean gray shadow. A short distance away he could see the gaunt lines of Sir John Bittle's home, and it had occurred to him that his investigations might very well include that wealthy upstart. It was just after ten o'clock, but the thought that the household would still be awake never gave the Saint a moment's pause: his was a superbly reckless bravado.

The house was surrounded by a high stone wall that increased its sinister and secretive air, making it look like a converted prison. The Saint worked round the wall with the noiseless surefootedness of a Red Indian. He found only two openings. There was a back en-

trance which looked more like a mediæval postern gate, and which could not have been penetrated without certain essential tools that were not included in Templar's travelling equipment. At the front there was a large double door a few yards back from the road, but this also was set into the wall, which would have formed a kind of archway at that spot if the doors had been opened.

It was left for the Saint to scale the wall itself. Fortunately he was tall, and he found that by standing on tiptoe and straining upward he was able to hook his fingers over the top. Satisfied, he took off his coat and held it with the tab between his teeth; then, reaching up, he got a grip and hauled himself to the full contraction of his muscles. Holding on with one hand, he flung his coat over the broken glass set into the top of the wall, and so scrambled over, dropping to the ground on the other side like a cat.

The Saint moved swiftly along the wall to the back entrance which he had observed, conducted a light-fingered search for burglar alarms, and found one which he disconnected. Then he unbarred the door and left it slightly ajar in readiness for his retreat.

That done, he went down on his knees and crawled toward the house. If the light had been strong enough to make him visible, his method of progress would have seemed to border on the antics of a lunatic, for he wriggled forward six inches at a time, his hands waving and weaving about gently in front of him. In this way he evaded two fine alarm wires, one stretched a few inches off the ground and the other at the level of his shoulder. He rose under the wall of the house, chuckling inaudibly, but he was taking no chances.

"Now let's take a look at the warrior who looks after himself so carefully," said the Saint, but he said it to himself.

The side of the house on which he found himself was in darkness, and after a second's thought he worked rapidly round to the south. As soon as he rounded the angle of the building he saw two patches of light on the grass, and crept along till he reached the French windows from which they were thrown. The curtains were half drawn, but he was able to peer through a gap between the hangings and the frames.

He was looking into the library—a large, lofty, oak-panelled room, luxuriously furnished. It was quite evident that Sir John Bittle's parsimony did not interfere with his indulgence of his personal tastes. The carpet was a rich Turk with fully a four-inch pile; the chairs were huge and inviting, upholstered in brown leather; a costly bronze stood in one corner, and the walls were lined with bookshelves.

These things the Saint noticed in one glance, before anything human caught his eye. A moment later he saw the man who could only have been Bittle himself. The late wholesale grocer was stout: the Saint could only guess at height, since Bittle was hunched up in one of the enormous chairs, but the millionaire's pink neck overflowed his collar in all directions. Sir John Bittle was in dinner dress, and he was smoking a cigar.

"Charming sketch of home life of Captain of Canning Industry," murmured the Saint, again to his secret soul. "Unconventional portraits of the Great. Picture on Back Page."

The Saint had thought Bittle was alone, but just as

he was about to move along he heard the millionaire's fat voice remark:

"And that, my dear young lady, is the position."

The Saint stood like a man turned to granite.

Presently a familiar voice answered, "I can't believe it."

The Saint edged away from the wall so that he could see into the room through the space between the half-drawn curtains. Patricia was in the chair opposite Bittle, tight-lipped, her handkerchief twisted to a rag between her fingers.

Bittle laughed—a throaty chuckle that did not disturb the comfortable impassiveness of his florid features. Templar also chuckled. If that chuckle could have been heard, it would have been found to have an unpleasant timbre.

"Even documents—bonds—receipts—won't convince you, I suppose?" asked the millionaire. He pulled a sheaf of papers from the pocket of his dinner jacket and tossed them into the girl's lap. "I've been very patient, but I'm getting tired of this hanky-panky. I suppose just seeing you made me silly and sentimental—but I'm not such a sentimental fool that I'm going to take another mortgage on an estate that isn't worth one half of what I've lent your aunt already."

"It'll break her heart," said Patricia, white-faced.

"The alternative is breaking my bank."

The girl started up, clutching the papers tensely.

"You couldn't be such a swine!" she said hotly. "What's a few thousand to you?"

"This," said Bittle calmly: "it gives me the power to make terms."

Patricia was frozen as she stood. There was a si-

lence that ticked out a dozen sinister things in as many seconds. Then she said, in a strained, unnaturally low voice, "What terms?"

Sir John Bittle moved one fat hand in a faint gesture of deprecation.

"Please don't let's be more melodramatic than we can help," he said. "Already I feel very self-conscious and conventional. But the fact is, I should like to marry you."

For an instant the girl was motionless. Then the last drop of blood fled from her cheeks. She held the papers in her two hands, high above her head.

"Here's my answer, you cad!"

She tore the documents across and across and flung the pieces from her, and then stood facing the millionaire with her face as pale as death and her eyes flaming.

"Good for you, kid!" commended the Saint inaudibly.

Bittle, however, was unperturbed, and once again that throaty chuckle gurgled in his larynx without kindling any corresponding geniality in his features.

"Copies," he said simply, and at that point the Saint thought that the conversational tension would be conveniently relieved with a little affable comment from a third party.

"You little fool!" said Bittle acidly. "Did you think I worked my way up from mud to millions without some sort of brain? And d'you imagine that a man who's beaten the sharpest wits in London at their own game is going to be baulked by a chit of a country child? Tchah!" The millionaire's lips twisted wryly. "Now you've made me lose my temper and get melo-

dramatic, just when I asked you not to. Don't let's have any more nonsense, please. I've put it quite plainly: either you marry me or I sue your aunt for what she owes me. Choose whichever you prefer, but don't let's have any hysterics."

"No, don't let's," agreed the Saint, standing just inside the room.

Neither had noticed his entrance, which had been a very slick specimen of its kind. He had slipped in through one of the open French windows, behind a curtain, and he stepped out of cover as he spoke, so that the effect was as startling as if he had materialized out of the air.

Patricia recognized him with a gasp. Bittle jumped up with an exclamation. His fat face, which had paled at first, became a deeper red. The Saint stood with his hands in his pockets and a gentle smile on his open face.

Bittle's voice broke out in a harsh snarl, "Sir——"

"To you," assented the Saint smoothly. "Evening. Evening, Pat. Hope I don't intrude."

And he gazed in an artlessly friendly way from face to face, as cool and self-possessed and saintly looking a six-foot-two of toughness as ever breezed into a peaceful Devonshire village. Patricia moved nearer to him instinctively, and Simon's smile widened amiably as he offered her his hand. Bittle was struggling to master himself: he succeeded after an effort.

"I was not aware, Mr. Templar, that I had invited you to entertain us this evening," he said thickly.

"Nor was I," said the Saint ingenuously. "Isn't that odd?"

Bittle choked. He was furious, and he was appre-

hensive of how long Templar might have been listening to the duologue; but there was another and less definite fear squirming into his consciousness. The Saint was tall, and although he was not at all massive there was a certain solid poise to his body that vouched for an excellent physique in fighting trim. And there was a mocking hell-for-leather light twinkling in the Saint's level blue eyes, and something rather ugly about his very mildness, that tickled a cold shiver out of Bittle's spine.

"Shall we say, as men of the world, Mr. Templar—it's hardly necessary to beat about the bush—that your arrival was a little inopportune?" said Bittle.

The Saint wrinkled his brow.

"Shall we?" he asked vaguely, as though the question was a very difficult riddle. "I give it up."

Bittle shrugged and went over to a side table on which stood decanter, siphon, and glasses.

"Whisky, Mr. Templar?"

"Thanks," said the Saint, "I'll have one when I get home. I'm very particular about the people I drink with. Once I had a friend who was terribly careless that way, and one day they fished him out of the canal in Soerabaja. I should hate to be fished out of anywhere."

"To show there's no ill-feeling . . ."

"If I drank your whisky, son," said the Saint, "I'm so afraid there might be all the ill-feeling we could deal with."

Bittle came back to the table and crushed the stump of his cigar into an ash tray. He looked at the Saint, and something about the Saint's quietness sent that draughty shiver prickling again up Bittle's vertebræ.

The Saint was still exactly where he had stood when he emerged from behind the curtain; the Saint did not seem at all embarrassed; and the Saint seemed to have all the time in the world to kill. The Saint, in short, looked as though he was waiting for something and in no particular hurry about it, and Bittle was beginning to get worried.

"Hardly conduct befitting a gentleman, shall we say, Mr. Templar?" Bittle temporized.

"No," said the Saint fervently. "Thank the Lord I'm not a gentleman. Gentlemen are such snobs. All the gentlemen around here, for instance, refuse to know you—at least, that's what I'm told—but I don't mind it in the least. I hope we shall get on excellently together, and that this meeting will be but the prelude to a long and enjoyable acquaintance, to mutual satisfaction and profit. Yours faithfully."

"You leave me very little choice, Mr. Templar," said Bittle, and touched the bell.

The Saint remained where he was, still smiling, until there was a knock on the door and a butler who looked like a retired prize fighter came in.

"Show Mr. Templar the door," said Bittle.

"But how hospitable!" exclaimed the Saint, and then, to the surprise of everyone, he walked coolly across the room and followed the butler into the passage.

The millionaire stood by the table, almost gaping with astonishment at the ease with which he had broken down such an apparently impregnable defence.

"I know these bluffers," he remarked with ill-concealed relief.

His satisfaction was of very short duration, for the

end of his little speech coincided with the sounds of a slight scuffle outside and the slamming of a door. While Bittle stared, the Saint walked in again through the window, and his cheery "Well, well, *well!*" brought the millionaire's head round with a jerk as the door burst open and the butler returned.

"Nice door," murmured the Saint.

He was breathing a little faster, but not a hair of his sleek head was out of place. The pugilistic butler, on the other hand, was not a little dishevelled, and appeared to have just finished banging his nose on to something hard. The butler had a trickle of blood running down from his nostrils to his mouth, and the look in his eyes was not one of peace on earth or goodwill toward men.

"Home again," drawled the Saint. "This is a peach of a round game, what?—as dear Algy would say. Now can I see the offices? House agents always end up their advertisements by saying that their desirable property is equipped with the usual offices, but I've never seen one of the same yet."

"Let me attim," uttered the butler, shifting round the table.

The Saint smiled, his hands in his pockets.

"You try to drop-kick me down the front steps, and you get welted on the boko," said Simon speculatively, adapting style to audience. "Now you want to whang into my prow—and I wonder where you get blipped this time?"

Bittle stepped between the two men, and in one comprehensive glance summed up their prospects in a rough-house. Then he looked at the butler and motioned toward the door.

The ex-pug went out reluctantly, muttering profane and offensive things, and the millionaire faced round again.

"Suppose you explain yourself?"

"Just suppose!" agreed Templar enthusiastically.

Bittle glowered.

"Well, Mr. Templar?"

"Quite, thanks. How's yourself?"

"Need you waste time playing the fool?" demanded Bittle shortly.

"Now I come to think of it—no," answered the Saint amiably. "But granny always said I was a terrible tease. . . . Well, sonny, taken all round I don't think your hospitality comes up to standard; and that being so I'll see Miss Holm back to the old roof tree. S'long."

And he took Patricia's arm and led her toward the French window, while Bittle stood watching them in silence, completely nonplussed. It was just as he seemed about to pass out of the house without further parley that the Saint stopped and turned, as though struck by a minor afterthought.

"By the way, Bittle," he said, "I was forgetting—you were going to pass over a few documents, weren't you?"

Bittle did not answer, and the Saint added:

"All about your side line in usury. Hand over the stuff and I'll write you a check now for the full amount."

"I refuse," snapped the millionaire.

"Please yourself," said the Saint. "My knowledge of Law is pretty scrappy, but I don't think you can do that without cancelling the debt. Anyway, I'll tell my

solicitor to send you a check, and we'll see what happens."

The Saint turned away again, and in so doing almost collided with Patricia, who had preceded him into the garden. The girl was caught in his arms for a moment to save a fall, and the Saint was surprised to see that she was gasping with suppressed terror. A moment later the reason was given him by a ferocious baying of great hounds in the darkness.

In one swift movement Simon had the girl inside the room, and had slammed the French windows shut. Then he stood with his back to the wall, half covering Patricia in the shelter of his wide shoulders, his hands on his hips, and a very saintly meekness overspreading his face.

"'Um—as Orace would say in the circumstances," murmured the Saint. "Bigger than Barnums. Do you mind playing the Clown while I open the Unique Mexican Knifethrowing Act?"

And Bittle, with a tiny automatic in his hand, was treated to a warning glimpse of the fine steel blade that lay along Simon Templar's palm.

Chapter IV

A SOCIAL EVENING

"No," said the Saint, shaking his head sadly, "it can't be done. It can't really. For one thing, we're getting all melodramatic, and I know how you hate that. For another thing, we've got the set all wrong. You've got to get into training for looking evil—just now, you're as harmless looking a blackguard as I've ever met. I'm strong for getting the atmosphere right. What d'you say to adjourning, and we can arrange to meet in Limehouse in about two months, which'll give you time to grow a beard and develop a cast in one eye and employ a few tame thugs by way of local colour. . . ."

The Saint rambled on in his free-and-easy manner, while his brain dealt rapidly with the situation. Bittle had not raised his automatic. It pointed innocuously into the carpet, held as loosely as it could be without falling, for Simon's eyes were narrowed down to glinting chips of steel that missed nothing, and Sir John Bittle had an uncomfortable feeling that those eyes were keen enough to note the slightest tightening of a muscle. The Saint was giving an admirable imitation of a man pretending to be off his guard, but the millionaire knew that the sight of the least threatening movement would telegraph an instant message to the hand that played with that slim little knife—and the Saint's general manner suggested that he felt calmly confident

of being able to reproduce any and every stunt in any and every Mexican Knifethrowing Act that ever was, with a few variations and trimmings of his own.

"You are not conversational, Bittle," said the Saint, and Bittle smiled.

"My style is, to say the least of it, cramped," replied the millionaire. "If I move, what are the chances of my being pricked with your pretty toy?"

"Depends how you move," answered the Saint. "If, for instance, you relaxed the right hand, so as to allow the ugly toy now reposing there to descend upon the carpet with what is known to journalists as a sickening thud—then, I might say that the chances are about one thousand to one against."

Bittle opened his hand, and the gun dropped. He stepped to one side, and the Saint, with a swift sweeping glide, picked up the weapon and dropped it into his pocket. At the same time he replaced his own weapon in its concealed sheath.

"Now we can be matey again," remarked Simon with satisfaction. "What's the next move? Taking things in a broad way, I can't credit your bunch with much brilliance so far. Dear old Spittle, why on earth must you make such an appalling bloomer? Don't you know that according to the rules of this game you ought to remain shrouded in mystery until Chapter Thirty? Now you've been and gone and spoiled my holiday," complained the Saint bitterly, "and I don't know how I shall be able to forgive you."

"You are a very extraordinary man, Mr. Templar." The Saint smiled.

"True, O King. But you're quite as strange a specimen as ever went into the Old Bailey. For a retired

grocer, your command of the Oxford language is astonishing."

Bittle did not answer, and the Saint gazed genially around and seemed almost surprised to see Patricia standing a little behind him. The girl had not known what to make of most of the conversation, but she had recovered from her immediate fear. There was a large assurance about everything the Saint did and said which inspired her with uncomprehending courage—even as it inspired Bittle with uncomprehending anxiety.

"Hope we haven't bored you," murmured Simon solicitously. "Would you like to go home?"

She nodded, and Templar looked at the millionaire.

"She would like to go home," Templar said in his most winning voice.

A thin smile touched Bittle's mouth.

"Just when we're getting matey?" he queried.

"I'm sure Miss Holm didn't mean to offend you," protested Simon. He looked at the girl, who stared blankly at him, and turned to Bittle with an air of engaging frankness. "You see? It's only that she's rather tired."

Bittle turned over the cigars in a box on a side table near the Saint, selected one, amputated the tip, and lighted it with the loving precision of a connoisseur. Then he faced Templar blandly.

"That happens to be just what I can't allow at the moment," said Bittle in an apologetic tone. "You see, we have some business to discuss."

"I guess it'll keep," said the Saint gently.

"I don't think so," said Bittle.

Templar regarded the other thoughtfully for a few

seconds. Then, with a shrug, he jerked the millionaire's automatic from his pocket and walked to the French windows. He opened one of them a couple of inches, holding it with his foot, and signed to the girl to follow him. With her beside him, he said:

"Then it looks, Bittle, as if you'll spend to-morrow morning burying a number of valuable dogs."

"I don't think so," said Bittle.

There was a quiet significance in the way he said it that brought the Saint round again on the alert.

"Go hon!" mocked Simon watchfully.

Bittle stood with his head thrown back and his eyes half closed, as though listening. Then he said:

"You see, Mr. Templar, if you look in the cigar box you will find that the bottom sinks back a trifle under quite a light pressure. In fact, it acts as a bell push. There are now three men in the garden as well as four bloodhounds, and two more in the passage outside this room. And the only dog I can imagine myself burying to-morrow morning is an insolent young puppy, who's chosen to poke his nose into my business."

"Well, well, *well,*" said the Saint, his hands in his pockets. "Well, well, WELL!"

Sir John Bittle settled himself comfortably in his armchair, pulled an ash stand to a convenient position, and continued the leisurely smoking of his cigar. The Saint, looking at him in a softly speculative fashion, had to admire the man's nerve. The Saint smiled; and then Patricia's hand on his arm brought him back with a jerk to the stern realities of the situation. He took the hand in his, pressed it, and turned the saintly smile on her in encouragement. Then he was weighing Bittle's automatic in a steady hand.

"Carrying on the little game of Let's Pretend," suggested Simon, "let's suppose that I sort of pointed this gun at you, all nervous and upset, and in my agitation I kind of twiddled the wrong knob. I mean, suppose it went off, and you were in the way? Wouldn't it be awkward!"

Bittle shook his head.

"Terribly," he agreed. "And you're such a mystery to Baycombe already that I'm afraid they'd talk. You know how unkind gossip can be. Why, they'd be quite capable of saying you did it on purpose."

"There's something in that," said Templar mildly, and he put the gun back in his pocket. "Then suppose I took my little knife and began playing about with it, and it flew out of my hand and took off your ear? Or suppose it sliced off the end of your nose? It's rotten to have only half a nose or only one ear. People stop and stare at you in the street, and so forth."

"And think of my servants," said Bittle. "They're all very attached to me, and they might be quite unreasonably vindictive."

"That's an argument," conceded the Saint seriously. "And now suppose you suggest a game?"

Bittle moved to a more comfortable position and thought carefully before replying. The time ticked over, but the Saint was too old a hand to be rattled by any such primitive device, and he leaned nonchalantly against the wall and waited patiently for Bittle to realize that the cat-and-mouse gag was getting no laughs that journey. At length Bittle said:

"I should be quite satisfied, Mr. Templar, if you would spend a day or two with me, and during that time we could decide on some adequate expression of your

regret for your behaviour this evening. As for Miss Holm, she and I can finish our little chat uninterrupted, and then I will see her home myself."

"'Um," murmured the Saint, lounging. "Bit of an optimist, aren't you?"

"I won't take 'no' for an answer, Mr. Templar," said Bittle cordially. "In fact, I expect your room is already being prepared."

The Saint smiled.

"You almost tempt me to accept," he said. "But it cannot be. If Miss Holm were not with us—well, I should be very boorish to refuse. But as a matter of fact I promised Miss Girton to join them in a sandwich and a glass of ale toward midnight, and I can't let them down."

"Miss Holm will make your excuses," urged Bittle, but the Saint shook his head regretfully.

"Another time."

Bittle moved again in the chair, and went on with his cigar. And it began to dawn upon the Saint that, much as he was enjoying the sociable round of parlour sports, the game was becoming a trifle too one-sided. There was also the matter of Patricia, who was rather a handicap. He found that he was still holding her hand, and was reluctant to make any drastic change in the circumstances, but business was business.

With a sigh the Saint hitched himself off the wall which he had found such a convenient prop, released the hand with a final squeeze, and began to saunter round the room, humming light-heartedly under his breath and inspecting the general fixtures and fittings with a politely admiring eye.

"This room is under observation from two points," Bittle informed him as a tactful precaution.

"Pity we haven't got a camera—the scene'd shoot fine for a shocker," was the Saint's only criticism.

And Simon went on with his tour of the room. He had taken Bittle's warning with the utmost nonchalance, but its reactions on the problem in hand and his own tentative solution were even then being balanced up in his mind. Bittle, meanwhile, smoked away with a large languidness which indicated his complete satisfaction with the entertainment provided and a sublime disregard for the time spent on digesting it. Which was all that the Saint could have asked.

In its way, it was a classical performance. Anyone with any experience of such things, entering the room, would have sensed at once that both men were past masters. Nothing could have been calmer than their appearance, nothing more polished than their dispassionate exchange of backchat.

The Saint worked his unhurried way round the room. Now he stopped to examine a Benares bowl, now an etching, now a fine old piece of furniture. The patina on a Greek vase held him enthralled for half a minute: then he was absorbed in the workmanship of a Sheraton whatnot. In fact, an impartial observer would have gathered that the Saint had no other interest in life than the study of various antiques, and that he was thoroughly enjoying a free invitation to take his time over a minute scrutiny of his host's treasures. And all the while the Saint's eyes, masked now by lazily drooping lids, were taking in all the details of the furnishing to which he did not devote any ostentatious attention, and search-

ing every inch of the walls for the spyholes of which Bittle had spoken.

The millionaire was unperturbed, and the Saint once again permitted the shadow of a smile to touch the corners of his mouth as he caught Patricia's troubled eyes. The smile hardly moved a muscle of his face, but it drew an answering tremor of the girl's lips that showed him that her spirits were still keeping their end up.

The Saint was banking on Bittle's confidence as a bluffer, and he was not disappointed. Bittle knew that, for all the guards with whom he had surrounded himself, his personal safety hung by the slender thread of a simulated carelessness for it. Bittle knew that to show the least anxiety, the faintest flutter of uncertainty, would have been to throw an additional weapon into Templar's already dangerously comprehensive armoury, and that was exactly what Bittle dared not do. Therefore the millionaire affected not to notice the Saint's movements, and never changed his position a fraction or allowed his eyes to betray him by following Simon round the room. Bittle leaned back among the cushions and gazed abstractedly at a water colour on the opposite wall. At another time he studied the pattern on the carpet. Then he looked expressionlessly at Patricia. Once he pored over his fingernails, and measured the length of ash on his cigar against his cuff. All the while the Saint was behind him, but Bittle did not turn his head, and the Saint was filled with hope and misgiving at the same time. He had located one peephole, cunningly concealed below a pair of old horse pistols which hung on the wall, but the second he had

failed to find. It might have been a bluff; in any case, the time was creeping on, and the Saint could not afford to carry his feigned languor too far. He would have to chance the second watcher.

He began a second circuit, deliberately passing in front of Bittle, and the millionaire looked up casually at him.

"Don't think I'm hurrying you," said Bittle, "but it's getting late, and you might have rather a tiring day to-morrow."

"Thanks," murmured Simon. "It takes a lot to tire me. But I've decided to spend the night with you, at any rate. You might tell the big stiff with the damaged proboscis to fill the hot-water bottle and lay out some nightshirts."

Bittle nodded.

"I can only commend your discretion," he remarked, "as sincerely as I appreciate your simple tastes."

"Not at all," murmured the Saint, no less suave. "Would it be troubling you too much to ask for the loan of a pair of bedsocks?"

The Saint was now behind Bittle again. He was standing a bare couple of feet from the millionaire's head, one hand resting lightly on the back of a small chair. The other hand was holding a bronze statuette up to the light, and the whole pose was so perfectly done that its hidden menace could not have struck the watchers outside until it was too late.

Bittle was a fraction quicker on the uptake. The Saint caught Patricia's eye and made an almost imperceptible motion toward the window; and at that moment the millionaire's nerve faltered for a split second, and he began to turn his head. In that instant the Saint

sogged the statuette into the back of Bittle's skull—without any great force, but very scientifically. In another lightning movement, he had jerked up the chair and flung it crashing into the light, and blackness fell on the room with a totally blinding density.

The Saint sprang toward the window.

"Pat!" he breathed urgently.

He touched her groping hand and got the French window open in a trice.

There was a hoarse shouting in the garden and in the corridor, and suddenly the door burst open and a shaft of light fell across the room, revealing the limp form of Bittle sprawled in the armchair. A couple of burly figures blocked the doorway, but Patricia and Simon were out of the beam thrown by the corridor lights.

Before she realized what was happening, the girl felt herself snatched up in a pair of steely arms. Within a bare five seconds of the blow that removed Sir John Bittle from the troubles of that evening the Saint was through the window and racing across the lawn, carrying Patricia Holm as he might have carried a child.

The complete manœuvre was carried through with so faultless a technique that Simon Templar, for all his burden, passed right between the two men who were waiting outside the French window, and the ambush was turned into a cursing pursuit. As soon as that danger was past, Simon paused for a moment to set the girl down again; and then, still keeping hold of her hand, he ran her toward the obscurity of a clump of bushes at the end of the lawn.

They had a flying start, and they reached the shrubbery with a lead of half a dozen yards. Without hesita-

tion the Saint plunged into the jungle, finding by instinct the easiest path between the bushes, doubling and dodging like a wild animal and dragging Patricia after him with no regard for the twigs and branches that ripped their clothes to shreds and grazed blood from the exposed skin. Presently he stopped dead, and she stood close beside him, struggling to control her breathing, while he listened for the sounds of pursuit. They could hear men ploughing clumsily through the shrubbery, calling to one another, crashing uncertainly about. Then, as the hunters realized that their quarry was running no longer, the noise died down, and was succeeded by a tense and straining hush.

Patricia heard Simon whispering in her ear.

"We're right by the wall. I'm going to get you over. Go home and don't say anything to your aunt. If I don't turn up in an hour, tell Dr. Carn. Get me? Don't, whatever you do, start raising hell in less than an hour."

"But aren't you coming?"

Her lips were right against his ear, so that she could feel his head move negatively, though she could not see it.

"Nope. I haven't quite had my money's worth yet. Come along."

She felt him move her so that she could touch the wall. Then he had stooped and was guiding her foot on to his bent knee. As he raised her other foot to his shoulder, while she steadied herself against the wall, a twig snapped under his heel, and the hunt was up again.

"Quick!" he urged.

He straightened up with her standing on his shoulders.

"Mind the glass on top. My coat's up there. Found it? . . . Good. Over you go. Have some beer waiting for me—I'll need it."

"I hate leaving you."

She could just see a tiny flashing blur of white as he moved a little away from the wall, for she was now nearly over, and she recognized it for his familiar smile. "Tell me that some time when I can make an adequate reply," he said. "Tinkety-tonk!"

Then she was gone—he drew himself up and almost thrust her down into the road outside.

The pursuers were very near, and the Saint broke off along the wall with a cheery "Tally-ho!" so that there should be no mistake as to his whereabouts. His job at the moment was to divert the attention of the hunt until the girl had reached safety. He also had a vague idea of taking a look at some of the other rooms of the house—it was only a vague idea, for the Saint was the most blithely irresponsible man in the world, and steadfastly refused to burden himself with a cut-and-dried programme.

Again he distanced the pursuit, working away from the wall to minimize the risk of being cornered, and trying to make enough noise to persuade the enemy that they were still chasing two people. Once, pausing in silence to relocate the trackers, he heard a scuffle not far away, which shortly terminated in an outburst of profanity and mutual recrimination; and the Saint chuckled. In being saved the trouble of distinguishing friend from foe he had an incalculable advantage over the others, although it made him wonder how long it would be before the search became more systematic and electric torches were brought into service. Or would

they decide to wait until daylight? The Saint began to appreciate the numerous advantages attached to a garden wall which so effectively shut out the peering of the stray passer-by.

Simon Templar, however, declined to let these portents oppress his gay recklessness. There seemed to be some reorganization going on among the ungodly, following the unfortunate case of mistaken identity, and it occurred to the Saint that the fun was losing the boisterous whole-heartedness which had ennobled its early exuberance. No sooner had this chastening thought struck him than he set out to restore the former state of affairs. Creeping along toward the main gate, where he expected to find a guard posted, he almost fell over a man crouching by a tree. Templar had the sentinel by the throat before he could cry out; then, releasing the grip of one hand, he firmly but unmistakably tweaked the man's nose. Before the sentinel had recovered from the surprise, the Saint had thrown him into a thorny bush and was sprinting for the cover on the other side of the drive. He had scarcely gained the gloom of another clump of bushes before the man's bellow of rage drifted like music to his ears. The cry was taken up from four different points, and the Saint chuckled.

A moment later he was frozen into immobility by the sound of a voice from the house rising above the clamour.

"Stop shouting, you blasted fools! Kahn—come here!"

"Tush!" murmured the Saint. "I can't have dotted you a very stiff one, honey, but it certainly hasn't improved your temper!"

He waited, listening, but he could make nothing of

the mutter of voices. Then came the muffled sounds of someone running across the lawn, followed by the dull thud of a wooden bar being thrown back. Then a clinking of metal.

Suddenly there was a snuffling whine, which sank again into a more persistent snuffling. The whine was taken up in three other different keys. Abruptly, the fierce deep-throated baying of a great hound rent the night air. Then there was only a hoarse whimpering.

"Damn their eyes!" said Templar softly. "This is where, item, one Saint, slides off in the direction of his evening bread and milk."

Even then he was fumbling for the bolts which held the heavy main gates. He had one back and was wrestling with the other when a dog whimpered eagerly only a few yards away. The Saint tore desperately at the metal, thanking his gods for the darkness of the night, and the bolt shot back. At the same instant there was a thunderous knocking on the door, and a vociferous barking replaced the whining of bloodhounds temporarily distracted from the scent.

"To be continued in our next, I think," grinned the Saint.

He pulled back the heavy door.

"So glad you've come, brothers," remarked the Saint in loud and hospitable accents. "We're hunting a real live burglar. Care to lend the odd paw?"

"Quietly," advised a voice.

A blinding beam of light flashed from the hand of the man who had stepped first through the opening. It stabbed at the Saint's eyes, dazzling him for a moment; then into the ray of it came a hand which held a small automatic pistol with a curious cylindrical gadget

screwed to the muzzle. The Saint knew the gadget for a silencer, and there was no doubt whatever about the accuracy of the aim.

"Quietly, Mr. Templar," repeated the crooning voice.

"Dear me!" said the Saint, who never swore when he was seriously annoyed, and put up his hands.

Chapter V

AUNT AGATHA IS UPSET

PATRICIA HOLM landed safely on her feet in the road outside the wall and set off steadily for home. She ran easily and smoothly, as a healthy girl can who has spent most of her life away from tubes and 'buses and taxis, although she was somewhat out of breath from keeping up with the Saint's deadly speed.

She had heard the Saint's cheery "Tally-ho!" and felt that there was a message for her in it, besides the surface bravado which was meant for the men in the garden —it was at the same time a spur to her pace, to remind her that it was up to her not to waste the advantage which his own actions were winning for her, and an encouragement, to tell her that he was as fit as a fiddle and ready for any amount of rough stuff and that there was no need for anyone to start fretting about him. So Patricia ran, obediently; and it was not until the echoes of the commotion had died away behind her and lost themselves in the other indistinguishable noises of the night, and she had slackened off into a brisk walk, that she grasped the full significance of the situation. Up to that point, the whole proceeding had been so fantastical and nightmarish, and the rush of astonishing events had come with such a staggering velocity, that she had been temporarily bereft of the power of coherent thought. Now, in the anti-climax of easing up her headlong flight,

she was able for the first time to see the general outline of the mystery and the danger.

She looked at her wrist watch, and saw from the luminous dial that it was five minutes to eleven. Say the Saint had given his orders five minutes ago: that meant that if anything went wrong she was still forbidden to summon the help of Carn until ten to twelve. And by that time . . . She shuddered, remembering the dogs. . . .

There was something sinister about Bittle and the big house behind that ominous wall. Of that she could be certain, for the mere intrusion of the Saint upon a private conversation—however compromising—could hardly have led even that impetuous young man to go to such lengths, any more than it could have made Bittle resort to such violent means to prevent their departure. She recalled the rumours which the Saint's eccentric habits had given rise to in the village, but her recollection of her brief association with him took away all the plausibility of current gossip even while it increased his mysteriousness. Patricia racked her brain for a theory that would hold water, and found none. She assembled the outstanding facts. Templar had some reason for being in the garden that night, and some reason for butting in on the millionaire, and she could not believe that the millionaire's proposal of marriage would have given the Saint sufficient provocation for what he had done, considering the casualness of their acquaintance. Bittle, for his part, seemed to fear and hate the Saint. Templar disliked Bittle enough to seize a convenient opportunity of dotting the millionaire one with a hefty bit of bronze. That was after Bittle had produced an automatic. And the general trend of things

suggested that Bittle's house was staffed with a tough bunch of bad hats who were quite ready to deal with unwelcome visitors in a most unusual fashion—almost as though they expected unwanted interference. And normal houses and normal millionaires did not have secret bell pushes in cigar boxes and peepholes from which their libraries could be watched. . . .

The girl had to give it up. At least, her faith in the Saint remained unshaken. It was impossible to believe that there was anything evil about the man. At that rate, Bittle was equally above suspicion—but Bittle's apparent harmlessness was of the bluff kind that might cover a multitude of sins; whereas the Saint's chief charm was his unreserved boyishness and his air of exaggerated masquerading. She felt that no sane wolf in sheep's clothing would have taken such elaborate pains to look like a pantomime wolf.

Whoever and whatever the Saint was, he had done her no injury. He had been her friend—and she had left him behind to face whatever music Bittle's myrmidons had the desire and brains to provide. . . . And the tuning-up of the orchestra which she had heard gave her a vivid impression that it was no amateur affair. . . . It was some consolation to reflect that the Saint's little solo, which had opened the concert, itself showed a truly professional touch; nevertheless, she was cursing herself right back to the Manor for deserting him, although she knew that if she had stayed she would only have hampered him.

She had hoped to be able to steal into the house unnoticed, but as she approached she saw a dark figure leaning on the front gate, and in a moment the figure hailed her with the voice of Miss Girton.

"Yes, it's me," said Patricia, and followed the woman to the door.

"I heard a lot of noise, and wondered what it was all about," Miss Girton explained. "Do you know?"

"There's been some excitement. . . ."

It was all Patricia could think of on the spur of the moment.

She had forgotten the damage inflicted on her clothes and her person by the game of hide-and-seek in the shrubbery, and was at first surprised at the way Miss Girton stared at her in the light of the hall. Then she looked at her torn skirt and the scratches on her arms.

"You don't seem to have missed much," remarked the older woman grimly.

"I can't explain just now," said a weary Patricia. "I've got to think."

She went into the drawing room and sank into a chair. Her guardian took up a position before her, legs astraddle, manlike, hands deep in the pockets of her coat, waiting for the account that she was determined to have.

"If Bittle's been getting fresh——"

"It wasn't exactly that," said the girl. "I'm quite all right. Please leave me alone for a minute."

The darkening alarm which had showed on Miss Girton's face gave way to a look of perplexity when she heard that her instinctive suspicion was ungrounded. She could be reasonably patient—it was one of her unfeminine characteristics. With a shrug of her heavy shoulders she took a gasper from a glaring yellow packet and lighted it. She smoked like a man, inhaling deeply, and her fingers were stained orange with nicotine.

Patricia puzzled over what excuse she was going to invent. She knew that Miss Girton could be as acute and ruthless in cross-examination as a lawyer. But the Saint's orders had been to say nothing before the hour had expired, and Patricia thought only of carrying out his orders. Doubtless the reason for them would be given later, together with some sort of elucidation of the mystery, but at present the sole considerations that weighed with her were those of keeping faith with the man whom she had left in such a tight corner and of finding some way to help him out of it if necessary.

"It was like this," Patricia began at last. "This afternoon I had a note from Bittle asking me to call after dinner without saying anything to anybody. It was most important. I went. After a lot of beating about the bush he told me that he'd had a mortgage on the Manor for years, and that you owed him a lot of money and were asking for more, and that he'd have to foreclose and demand payment of your debts. Was that true?"

"It was," replied Agatha Girton stonily.

"But why did you have to—— Oh, surely, there can't have been any need to borrow money? I always understood that Dad left a small fortune."

Miss Girton shrugged.

"My dear child, I had to draw on that."

Patricia stared incredulously. Miss Girton, with a face of wood and in a coldly dispassionate voice, added, like an afterthought:

"I've been blackmailed for six years."

"Who by?"

"Does that matter to you? Go on with your story." Patricia jumped her.

"I think, in the circumstances, I'll please myself what

I tell you," she said with a dangerous quietness. "It might be more to the point if you told me what you've done with the money entrusted to you. Six years, Aunt Agatha? That was three years after I came here. . . . You were always making trips abroad, and kept me on at school as long as you could. . . . Weren't you in Africa six years ago? You were away a long time, I remember——"

"That will do," said Miss Girton harshly.

"Will it?" asked the girl.

If her aunt had been tearful and frightened, Patricia would have been ready to comfort her, but weakness was not one of Miss Girton's failings, and her aggressively impenitent manner could provoke nothing but resentment. A storm was perilously near when an interruption came in the shape of a ring at the front door. Miss Girton went to answer it, and Patricia heard in the hall the spluttering of an agitated Algy. In a moment the immaculate Mr. Lomas-Coper himself came into the drawing room.

"Why, there you are!" he gasped fatuously, as if he could scarcely believe his eyes. "And I say!—what? Been bird's-nestin' in your party frock!"

And Algy stood goggling through his monocle at the girl's disarray.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" she smiled, though inwardly she was cursing the arrival of another person to whom explanations would have to be made. "Aunt Agatha simply sagged when she saw me."

"I should think so!" said Algy. "What happened to the eggs? Tell me about it."

"But what have you come here in such a flurry for?" she countered.

Mr. Lomas-Coper gaped, groping feebly in the air. "But haven't you heard? Of course not—I forgot to tell you. You know we're next door to old Bittle? Well, there's been no end of a shindy. Lots of energetic souls whooflin' round the garden, yellin' blue murder, an' all Bittle's pack of man-eatin' hounds howlin' their heads off. So old Algy goes canterin' round for news, thinks of you, and comes rampin' along to see if you've heard anything about it an' find out if you'd like to totter along to the Château Bittle an' join in the game. And here you are, lookin' as if you'd been in the thick of it yourself. Doocid priceless! Eh? What? What?"

He beamed, full of an impartial good humour, and not at all abashed by the unenthusiastic reception of his brilliance. Miss Girton stood over by the settee, lighting a fresh gasper from the wilting stump of the last, a rugged and gaunt and inscrutable woman. Patricia was suddenly glad of the arrival of Algy. Although a fool, he was a friend: as a fool, he would be easily put off with any facile explanation of her dishevelment, and as a friend he was an unlooked-for straw to be caught at in the turmoil that had flooded the girl's life that night.

"Sit down, Algy," she pleaded tolerantly. "And for Heaven's sake don't stare at me like that. There's nothing wrong."

Algernon sat down and stopped staring, as commanded, but it was more difficult to control his excited loquacity.

"I'm all of a dither," he confessed superfluously. "I don't know whether I'm hoofin' it on the old Gibus or the old Dripeds, sort of style, y'know."

Patricia looked at her watch. It was twenty past eleven. That meant half an hour to go before she could

appeal to Carn. Why Carn?—she wondered. But Algy was still babbling on.

"Abso-jolly-old-uutely, all of a doodah. It's shockin'. I always thought the Merchant Prince was too good to be true, an' here he is comin' out into the comic limelight as a sort of what not. I could have told you so."

"Aren't you rather jumping to conclusions?" asked Patricia gently, and Algy's mouth dropped open.

"But haven't you been lookin' up the grocery trade?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't been near the place. I went out for a walk and missed the edge of the cliff in the dark. Luckily I didn't fall far—there was a ledge—but I had a stiff climb getting back."

He collapsed like a marionette with the strings cut.

"And you haven't been fightin' off the advances of a madman? No leerin' lunatic tryin' to rob you of life and/or honour?"

"Of course not."

"Oo-er!" The revelation was too much for Mr. Lomas-Coper—one might almost have thought that he was disappointed at the swift shattering of his lurid hypothesis. "Put the old tootsy into it, haven't I? What? . . . I'd better be wobblin' home. Stammerin' out his apologies, the wretched young man took his hat, his leave, and his life."

She caught his sleeve and pulled him back.

"Do be sensible," she begged. "Was your uncle worried?"

"Nothing ever moves the old boy," said Algy. "He just takes a swig at the barleywater and says it reminds him of Blitzensfontein or something. Unsympathetic, I call it."

The girl's mind could give only a superficial attention to Algy's prattle. She had not known that the noise had been great enough to rouse the neighbourhood, and she wondered how that would affect the Saint's obscure plans. On the other hand, Bittle would hardly dare go to extremes while she was at large and could testify to some of the events of the evening, and while other people's curiosity had been aroused by the resultant hullabaloo. Then she remembered that Bittle's house and Bloem's stood some distance apart from the others, and it was doubtful whether enough of the din could have been heard outside to attract the notice of Sir Michael Lapping or the two retired Civil Servants—whose bungalows were the next nearest. But Bloem and Algy knew, and their knowledge might save the Saint.

Miss Girton, who had been holding aloof for some time, suddenly said:

"What's the fuss about, anyhow?"

"Oh, a noise. . . ." Algy, abashed, was unwontedly reticent, and seemed to want nothing more than the early termination of the discussion. He fidgeted, polishing his monocle industriously. "Sir John Bittle kind of giving a rough party, don't you know."

"I think we've had quite enough nonsense for one evening," remarked Agatha Girton. "Everyone's a bundle of nerves. Is there any need for all this excitement?"

She herself had lost her usual sangfroid. Under the mask of grim disapproval she was badly shaken—Patricia saw the slight trembling of the big rough hand that held the limp cigarette.

"Right as per," agreed Algy weakly. "Sorry, Aunt Agatha."

Miss Girton was absurdly pettish.

"I decline to adopt you as a nephew, Mr. Lomas-Coper."

"Sorry, Aunt—Miss Girton. I'll tool along."

Patricia smiled and patted his hand as she said good-bye, but the ordinarily super-effervescent Algy had gone off the boil. He contrived a sickly smile, but he was clearly glad of an excuse to leave the scene of his *faux pas*.

"Come and see us to-morrow," invited Patricia, and he nodded.

"Most frightfully sorry, and all that rot," he said. "I never did have much of a brain, anyway. Let me know if there's anything I can do, or anything, y'know. What? Cheer-tiddly-ho!"

He offered a hand to Miss Girton, but she looked down her nose at it and turned away.

"Honk-honk!" said Algy feebly, and departed.

They heard the front door close with a click, and were impressed with Mr. Lomas-Coper's humility. Among his more normal habits was that of slamming doors with a mighty bang.

"You were very hard on Algy," said Patricia resentfully.

"I can't be bothered with the fool," responded Miss Girton brusquely. "Thank Heavens he swallowed that wild yarn of yours about falling off a cliff. If he'd had any brains, the whole village would have been talking about you to-morrow. Now, what's the truth?"

Patricia looked at her watch again. The time was crawling. Eleven-thirty. She looked up and responded:

"That yarn's as good as another."

"Not for me." Agatha Girton came and stood over

the girl. She looked very forbidding and masculine at that moment, and Patricia had a fleeting qualm of fear. "What happened at Bittle's?"

"Oh, nothing. . . . He told me that the only way to save you was for me to marry him."

"Did he?" said Miss Girton harshly. "The swine!"

"Aunt Agatha!"

"You make me sick! He is a swine—why shouldn't I say so? And with an adjective, if I choose. Why didn't you tell him so yourself? What did you say?"

"I——" Patricia pulled herself up. The Saint's volcanic arrival had ended the discussion somewhat abruptly. "I didn't know what to say," answered Patricia truthfully.

Miss Girton glowered down at the girl.

"And then he got fresh?"

"Not—not exactly. You see——"

"Then who did?"

Patricia covered her eyes.

"Oh, leave me alone! Tell me how you got into his debt."

"There's nothing much to tell," replied Agatha Girton coldly. "When Bittle first came, and was trying to get into Baycombe society, nobody returned his calls. Then he called on me and insisted on seeing me—I suppose because he thought the Manor had the most influence. He knew I was hard up—I don't know how—and if I helped him he'd help me. It was my only way out. I agreed. You know he's been here several times, but even then I couldn't make anyone else take him up, although he didn't seem at all uneducated and behaved perfectly. They're all snobs here. . . . I had to go on borrowing from him, and he didn't seem to mind,

though he wasn't getting much return for it. That's all there is to it."

Patricia bit her lip.

"I see. And even though you were using my money you didn't condescend to tell me anything about it."

"What good would that have done?"

"Wasn't there anything——"

"Nothing whatever," said Miss Girton flatly.

Patricia looked at her.

"Then might I ask what you propose to do now you've come to the end of your resources?"

Agatha Girton started another cigarette, and her hands were a little more unsteady. For a moment she failed to meet the girl's eye, and stared fixedly out of the window. Then she looked at Patricia again.

"You must leave that to me," said Miss Girton, in a low inhuman voice that sent an involuntary tingle of dread crawling up Patricia's spine.

The girl rose and walked to another part of the room, to get away from the dull frightening eyes of Agatha Girton. At any other time she would have known better how to deal with the revelation that had been made to her, but now all her thoughts were with the Saint, and she could not concentrate on this new problem—and, if she had been able to, she would not have dared to tackle it, for fear of creating a situation which might prevent her carrying out his instructions if he failed to put in an appearance at the appointed time. Miss Girton was as strong as an ordinary man, and her temper that night was not to be trusted.

Fifteen minutes still to go—three-quarters of an hour since she left the Saint in the garden.

"What's the matter with you, child?" Agatha Gir-

ton's rasping voice demanded sharply. "Why do you keep looking at your watch?"

"To see the time."

She felt an absurd desire to smile. The retort would have tickled the Saint to death—she could visualize his impish delight—but Agatha Girton was less easily satisfied.

"Why should you bother about the time?"

"I'm not going to be badgered like this!" flamed Patricia unexpectedly.

Her patience had worn very thin during the last quarter of an hour, and she knew that her anxiety was desperately near to driving her into indiscreet anger or a flood of tears for relief. She faced Miss Girton mutinously.

"I'll see you to-morrow," she said, and left the room without another word.

She went up to her bedroom and paced up and down restlessly. Leaning out of the wide-open window, she could hear nothing from the direction of Bittle's house. Looking the other way, she could see the black shape of Carn's cottage. There was a light in one downstairs window: apparently the doctor had not yet retired. She thought of going round and chatting to him until the time had run out, for if all was well and the Saint arrived and found her out he would be sure to try Carn first for news of her. For a little while she hesitated: her acquaintance with Carn was very slight. But in a moment the sound of the windows downstairs being closed and secured filled her with an unreasoning panic.

She opened her door and flew down the stairs. She could hear Miss Girton pacing heavily across the

lounge; but she sped past the door as silently as she could, crossed the hall, and let herself out.

The cool breath of the night air restored her to reason, but she did not turn back. She closed the door without a sound and walked resolutely round to Carn's house. Her ring was answered at once by the man himself, and she remembered that he kept no servant on the premises.

The doctor's genial red face was one florid expression of surprise.

"My dear Miss Holm!"

"Am I disturbing you?" she smiled. "I began to feel terribly dull and depressed, and I thought a little course of you would be a tonic. That is, if you can bear it?"

He became aware of the fact that he was preventing her from entering, and stood aside.

"You honour me," he said. "But I'm quite alone. . . ."

"Doctors are above suspicion, aren't they?" she laughed. "And I promise to behave."

He still seemed a little self-conscious, but led the way into his study. She was a little puzzled at his awkwardness, and wondered why even such an uncouth man as he had not been smoothed down by his professional training. Nevertheless, his manner, if ungraceful, was plainly irreproachable. He brought up an armchair for her and swept a mass of papers off the table into a drawer. She noticed that there were some sections of large-scale surveys among them, and he explained:

"I'm interested in geology as well as bugs, you know. I'm afraid you'd find it rather a dull subject, but it amuses me. And I'm very interested in my fellow men."

Before she realized what she was doing, she had asked his opinion of Simon Templar.

"Templar? A very interesting specimen. I don't think I can make a pronouncement yet—I met him for the first time to-day. A very—er—unusual young man, but quite charming to talk to." Carn did not seem to wish to continue the analysis, and she was left with the idea that he would prefer to be sure of her estimate of the Saint before committing himself. "Would you like some tea? Or some ginger beer? It's all I've got in the house."

"No, thanks, if you don't mind." She thought. "It's rather difficult. . . . You see—— Is Mr. Templar in any danger?"

Carn looked at her with a keenness that was unforeseen in a man of his type.

"What makes you ask that, Miss Holm?"

"Well, he talks a lot about it, doesn't he?"

Carn pursed his lips.

"Yes, he does," he admitted guardedly. "I shouldn't venture to give a definite opinion at this stage. Might one inquire, first, what Mr. Templar is to you? Is he a particular friend of yours, for instance?"

"I've known him such a short time," she replied, as cautiously. "But I must say I like him very much."

"Would it be impertinent to ask if you were in love with him?" pursued Carn; and, seeing her blush, he averted his eyes and babbled on in an embarrassed attempt at a fatherly tone: "I see that it would. But perhaps Mr. Templar is more susceptible. As a friend, you would do him a great service by using whatever influence you have to persuade him of his foolhardiness."

"Then he is in danger?"

Carn sighed.

"Purely of his own making," he said. "Mr. Templar has elected to play a very dangerous game. I can't say any more. Perhaps he'll tell you himself."

Patricia looked at her watch for the twentieth time. There were still six minutes to pass.

Chapter VI

THE KINDNESS OF THE TIGER

"HERE we are again," murmured the Saint. "Seeing quite a lot of each other to-night, aren't we? And how's the occiput? Not dented beyond repair, I hope."

Bittle inclined his head.

"A trifle primitive," he said urbanely, "but very effective. I have views of my own, however, on the subject of physical violence, which I shall present you with in due course."

"Splendid," said Templar.

He looked around for the man who had been covering him, and bowed to that gentleman with a smile.

"Dear old bloomin' Bloem, of course," remarked the Saint sociably. "I knew we'd find you in the thick of the fun. Quite one of the dogs of the *dorp,* or village, aren't you? And, just in case of accidents, would you rather be blipped on the jaw or in the solar plexus? A jolt in the tum-tum is more painful; but on the other hand the cove who stops one just where his face changes its mind is liable to carry a scar around with him for some time. Just as you like, of course—I always try to oblige my customers in these little details."

"That will do, Mr. Templar," Bittle's voice broke in curtly. "I think you've talked quite enough for one evening."

"But I haven't started yet," complained the Saint.

"I was just going to tell one of my favourite stories. Old Bloem's heard it before, but it might be a new one on you. The one about an Italian gentleman called Fernando, who double-crossed some of the band-o. They got even for this with the aid of a kris—and that was the end of Fernando. Any applause?"

The Saint looked about him in his mild way, as though he literally expected an outburst of clapping. Nobody moved. Bloem still had his automatic accurately trained on the Saint, and the Boer's leathery face betrayed nothing. Bittle had gone ashy pale. The butler and a couple of other hard nuts who had followed the party into the library stood like graven images.

"I told you—he knows too much," said Bloem. "Better not take any chances this time."

"I'm very upset about this," said Simon earnestly. "That one usually gets a rousing reception. Poor old Fernando—he used up so much energy cursing Tigers and things that he didn't live quite long enough to tell me where the spondulicks were. 'Baycombe, in England, Devonshire,' gasps Fernando, with the haft of the kris sticking out of him, and the blood choking his throat. 'The old house . . .' And then he died. Just like in a storybook, and deuced awkward, with so many old and oldish houses lying about. But Fernando certainly hated Tigers, and you can't blame him."

Bloem raised the gun a trifle, and his knuckles whitened under the brown skin of his hand.

"It is easily settled," he muttered, and the Saint saw death staring him in the face.

"No!" shouted Bittle.

The millionaire flung himself forward, knocking up the pistol. Bittle was trembling. He mopped his

brow with a large white handkerchief, breathing heavily.

"You fool!" he jerked. "The girl's been here—he helped her get away. If anything happens to him she'll talk. D'you want to put a rope round all our necks?"

"You always did argue soundly, Bittle darling," said the Saint appreciatively.

He seated himself on the table, swinging his legs, and the proverbial cucumber would have looked smoking hot beside him.

"It must be arranged so as to look like an accident," said Bittle. "That damned girl will have the police buzzing about our ears unless the circumstances are above suspicion."

Bloem shrugged.

"The girl can be silenced," he stated dispassionately.

"You'll leave the girl alone," snarled Bittle "Where's the Chief?"

The Saint saw Bloem's face convulse with a warning scowl.

"He will return later."

"Now, that's good news," said Simon. "Am I really going to meet the celebrated Tiger at last? You've no idea how much I want to see him. But he's such an elusive cove—always incog."

"You need have no fear, Mr. Templar," said Bittle, "that the Tiger will show himself to you unless he is quite certain that you will never be able to use your knowledge against him. I think," added the millionaire suavely, "that you may expect to meet the Tiger tonight."

The Saint realized that Bittle's panic of a few moments past had been caused by the fear of being in-

volved in a police inquiry rather than by the horror of witnessing a cold-blooded murder. Bittle was quite calm again, but there was no trace of human pity in his faded eyes, and the level tone in which his significant afterthought was delivered would have struck terror into the souls of most men. But the Saint's nerves were like chilled steel and his optimism was unshakeable. He met Bittle's eyes steadily, and smiled.

"Don't gamble on it," advised the Saint. "I've lived pretty dangerously for eight years, and nobody's ever killed me yet. Even the Tiger mightn't break the record."

"I hope," said Bittle, "that the Tiger will prove to be as clever as you are."

"Hope on, sonnikins," said the Saint cheerfully.

They had searched him from crown to toe when he came in from the garden, but they had left him his cigarette case, and for this he was duly thankful. The case was a large one, and carried a double bank of cigarettes. There were some peculiarities about the cigarettes on one side of the case which the Saint had not felt bound to explain to Bittle when he returned it; for several of the victories which Templar had scored against apparently impossible odds in the course of his hectic career as a gentleman adventurer had been due to his habit of invariably keeping at least one card up his sleeve—even when he had not got aces parked in his belt, under his hat, and in the soles of his shoes. Meanwhile, it had not yet come to the showdown, and the Saint did not believe in performing his particular brand of parlour tricks simply to amuse the assembled company. He selected a cigarette from the other side of the case (which in itself was not quite an ordinary case,

for one of the edges, which was guarded when the case was shut, was as sharp as a razor) and began to smoke with a sublime indifference to the awkwardness of his predicament.

Bittle and Bloem were arguing in low tones at the other end of the room, and both were armed. The pugilistic butler was posted at the door, and it was unlikely that he would be caught napping a second time. The Saint could probably have beaten him in a straight fight, but it would not have been an easy job, and the audience in this case would most certainly interfere. The other two men stood by the French windows, to prevent a repetition of the Saint's earlier unceremonious exit: they were both hard and husky specimens, and the Saint, weighing up the prospects with a fighter's eye, decided that that retreat was effectually barred for the time being. There were few men that the Saint, in splendid training, would have hesitated to tackle single-handed, and few men that he would not have backed himself to tie in knots and lay out all neat and tidy inside five minutes, into the bargain; but he had to admit that a team of three heavyweights and a couple of automatics totalled up to something a bit above his form. Wherefore the Saint stayed sitting on the table and placidly smoked his cigarette, for he had never believed in getting worked up before the fireworks started.

He looked at his watch, and found that there was a clear half-hour to go before he could expect any help from outside. He blessed his foresight in telling Patricia to go to Carn if anything went wrong, but that was a last resource which the Saint hoped he would not have to call upon. Simon wanted nothing less than to be

under any sort of obligation to the detective, and he certainly did not want to give Carn a better hand than the deal had given him. Nevertheless, it was comforting to know that Carn was at hand in case of a hitch—not to mention the admirable Orace, who would shortly be getting restive, even if he had not started to move already. And it was satisfying to find that a similar reflection was cramping the style of the ungodly considerably.

The Saint's meditations were interrupted by the sound of a bell ringing somewhere in the depths of the house. The sound was very faint, but the Saint's hearing was abnormally keen, and he caught what most other men would have missed—the eccentric rhythm of the ringing. He had noted this down and pigeonholed it in his mind when a knock came on the door and a man entered. He muttered something to Bittle, and the millionaire left the room. Bloem strolled over to the Saint, who welcomed him with a smile.

"Our one and only Tiger at last?"

Bloem nodded, and looked curiously at the Saint.

"You have given us more trouble than you know," he said. "You have been extraordinarily lucky—but even the most astounding luck comes to an end."

"Just what they told me at Monte," agreed the Saint. "They say the Bank always wins in the long run."

Watching closely, Simon could just note the least flicker of Bloem's eyelids.

"Fernando, of course," said Bloem, half to himself.

"Even so," murmured the Saint. "I know everything but the answer to the two most important questions of all—Who is the Tiger? and Where has he cached the

loot? And I've a feeling that it won't be long now before I get next to even those secrets."

"You're very confident," said Bloem.

The man's self-control was not far from perfection, but the Saint also played poker, and he had summed up Bloem to the last full stop in the course of that brief conversation. Bloem's nerves were none too good—no man who was reasonably sure of himself would have been made to feel vaguely uneasy by such a slender bluff. That put the Saint one up on Bloem, but the Saint did not disclose his knowledge of the state of the score. His smile did not vary its quiet assurance one iota.

"I'm an odds-on chance," said the Saint lightly. "Which reminds me—how are T. T. Deeps?"

Bloem did not answer, and the Saint prattled on:

"Now, I must say you had me thinking very hard over that dud gold mine. Why should any sane man—you observe, Mynheer, that I credit you with being sane—why should any sane man want to get control of a gold mine that hasn't turned up any gold for two years? That's what I said to my broker, and he sent a cable out to the Transvaal especially to find out. Back comes the reply: We Don't Know. The mine hasn't been worked for ages, and only the greenhorn prospectors bother to look over the district—the old hands know that there isn't enough pay dirt for a hundred square miles around the T. T. borings to stop a snail's tooth. And yet our one and only Hans is raking in all the shares he can find, reminding 'Change of a stock they'd all forgotten existed, and every poor little rabbit of a mug investor is hunting up his scrip and wondering whether to unload while the unloading's good or

chance his arm for a fortune. All of which, to a nasty, suspicious mind like mine, is distinctly odd."

"I'm glad to see that the worry hasn't prematurely aged you, Mr. Templar," said Bloem.

"Oh, not at all," said the Saint. "You see, just when I was on the point of going off my rocker with the strain, and my relatives were booking a room for me in a nice quiet asylum, along comes a flash of inspiration. Just suppose, Bloem—only suppose—that a bunch of bad hats had brought off one of the biggest bank breaks in history. Suppose they'd got away with something over a cool million in gold. Suppose they'd humped the stuff all the way over the Atlantic, and fetched up and settled down and stowed the body away in an English village so far off the beaten track that it'd be lost for good if it wasn't for the railway time-tables. And then suppose—mind you, this is only a theory—suppose they felt quite happy that the dicks weren't on the trail, and began to puzzle out how they were going to cash the proceeds of the dirty work. First of all, melt it down—there aren't so many warriors hawking golden American Eagles around that the money-changers don't look twice at you when you try to pass off a sack of 'em. Right. But now you aren't so much better off, because a golden million tots up to a hairy great ingot, and people would start asking where the stuff came from—whether you grow it in the kitchen garden or make it in the bathroom before breakfast. What then?"

"What, indeed?" prompted Bloem in a tired voice.

"Why," exclaimed the Saint delightedly, as though he had caught Bloem with a conundrum, "what's wrong

with getting hold of a dead-as-mutton gold mine, losing a lot of gold in it, and then finding it again?"

"Quite," said Bloem with purely perfunctory interest.

Simon shook his head.

"It won't wash, Angel Face," he said. "It won't wash. Really it won't. And you know it. They may have christened me Simon, but I've got a lot less simple since then."

Bloem turned away very wearily, as if he found the Saint's monologues so boring that he had great difficulty in keeping awake, but that did not stop him hearing the Saint's soft chuckle of sheer merriment. Bloem was good, but he was not quite good enough. There had been few doubts in the Saint's mind about the accuracy of his diagnosis, and those that had existed were now gloriously dispelled. Nearly all the threads were in his hands, and the tangle was gradually straightening out.

But who was the Tiger? That was the most important question of all, barring only the whereabouts of the spoil. Who in all Baycombe kept under his modest hat the brain that had conceived and organized that stupendous coup? Bloem, Bittle, and Carn could be ruled out. That left the highly respected Sir Michael Lapping, the pleasant but brainless Mr. Lomas-Coper, the masculine Miss Girton, and the two retired and retiring I. C. S. men, Messrs. Shaw and Smith. Five runners, and a darned sight too little help from the form book. The Saint frowned. Tackling the problem in the light of the law of probability, every one of the possibles had to be ruled out, which was manifestly absurd. Wiring into it with any mystery story as a textbook, it at once appeared that Lapping was too far above

suspicion to escape it, Algy was too frankly brainless to be anything but the possessor of the Great Brain, Agatha Girton was quite certain to turn out to be a man masquerading as a woman, and Shaw and Smith kept too much in the background to avoid the limelight. Which once again was manifestly absurd. And the order of seniority was of little assistance, for Bloem, Algy, Agatha Girton, and Bittle had all been living in Baycombe for some time before the Tiger smashed the strong-room of the Confederate Bank of Chicago—on a general estimate, Simon reckoned that the Tiger had spent at least five years over that crime. And that was a deduction that confirmed the Saint's respect for the Tiger's brilliance without going any distance to aid the solution of the mystery of the Tiger's identity.

The Saint had got no further when Bittle returned and drew Bloem to one side. Simon could only hear a word here and there. He gathered that the Tiger was furious with Bittle for taking so long and making so much noise over capturing the prisoner; that Bittle would have liked to see the Tiger do better himself; that the Tiger had an Idea. There followed some mutterings that the Saint did not catch, and then came one sentence quite distinctly:

"The Tiger says we must let him go."

Bloem gave an exclamation, and Bittle talked further. The Saint's brain was whirring like a buzz saw. Let him go, with so much given away and most of the court cards in their hands? Simon wondered if he had heard aright, but in a moment Bittle left Bloem and came over to confirm the sensitiveness of the Saint's auditory nerves.

"It is getting late, Mr. Templar," said the millionaire, "and we all feel that the festivities have been kept up long enough. Pray do not let us detain you any longer."

"Meaning?" suggested Simon, with as much levelness as he could command.

"Meaning that you are free to go as soon as you like."

Bittle looked hard at the Saint as he spoke, and the malevolence that glittered in his eyes belied the geniality of his speech. Bittle was clearly upset at having to carry out such a command. He barked an order, and the escort of roughnecks sidled out of the room, closing the door behind them. Bloem was fidgeting with his tie, and he kept one hand in a pocket that bulged heavily.

"That's nice of you," drawled the Saint. "You won't mind if I take Anna, will you?"

He strolled coolly over to the secretaire, jerked open a drawer, and retrieved the knife that they had taken from him, slipping it back into the sheath under his sleeve. Then he faced the two men again.

"Really," he remarked in a tone of polite inquiry, "your kindness overwhelms me. And I never put you down for a brace of birds too gravely burdened with faith, hope, and charity. Is Miss Holm such an insuperable obstacle—to Supermen like yourselves?"

"I think," said Bittle smoothly, "that you would be wise not to ask too many questions. It is quite enough for you to know, Mr. Templar, that your phenomenal luck has held—perhaps for the last time. You had better say good-night before we change our minds."

The Saint smiled.

"You have no minds," he said. "The Tiger says 'Hop!' and you blinkin' well hop. . . . I wonder, now, is it because you're scared of Orace? Orace is a devil when he's roused, and if you'd bumped me off and he'd got to know about it there'd've been hell to pay. Possibly you're wise."

"Possibly," snarled Bloem, as though he did not believe it, and the Saint nodded.

"There is always the chance that I might go and talk to the police, isn't there?"

Bittle was lighting a cigar, and he looked up with a twisted mouth.

"You are not a man who loses his nerve and goes yelping to Scotland Yard, Mr. Templar," he answered. "Also, there is quite a big prize at stake. I think we can rely on you."

The Saint stared back with a kind of reluctant admiration.

"Almost I see in you the making of sportsmen," he said.

"I can only hope," returned Bittle impassively, "that you will find the sport to your liking."

Simon shook his head.

"You won't disappoint me, Beautiful One," he murmured. "I feel it in my bones. . . . And so to bed. . . .Give the Tiger my love, and tell him I'm sorry I wasn't able to meet him." And the Saint paused, struck by a sudden thought. "By the way—about Fernando. You know somebody's going to swing for him, don't you? I mean, if things start to go badly, make sure the Tiger gets all the blame to himself, or else you might swing with him."

"We shall be careful," Bittle assured him.

"Splendid," said the Saint. "Well, cheerio, souls. Sleep tight, and pleasant dreams."

He sauntered to the French windows and opened them.

"If you don't mind—— I have a rooted dislike for dark corridors. One never knows, does one?"

"Mr. Templar." The millionaire stopped him. "Before you go——"

The Saint turned on the terrace and looked back into the room. He was still debonair and smiling, and although the shrubbery had given the *coup de grâce* to his ancient and disreputably comfortable clothes, he contrived by some subtle gift of personality to look immaculate enough to wander into Claridge's without the commissionaire spotting him and shooing him round to the tradesmen's entrance. Only the Saint knew what an effort that air of careless ease cost him. The atmosphere was positively dripping with the smell of rats, but Simon Templar never twitched a nostril.

"Comrade?"

"It might save you spending a sleepless night, and catching your death of cold," observed Bittle, "if I told you that the Tiger has already left. So you needn't bother to hang about outside."

"Thanks," said the Saint. "I won't. And it might save you a longish walk and a lot of trouble if I told you that Orace and I sleep in watches, turn and turn about, so that any of your pals who call round in the hope of being able to catch us napping will have to be very fly. . . . S'long!"

He vanished into the darkness like a wraith, almost before the men in the library could have realized that he was gone. He went scraping through the shrubbery

again to the wall, got his coat over the top as before, and was over like a cat.

He dropped lightly to the ground, pulled on the tattered coat, and struck off away from the wall after no more than a couple of seconds' pause to listen and scan the blackness in every direction. Guided by an innate bump of locality, he established his bearings at once and set off on a wide detour that would bring him eventually into the grounds at the back of the Manor. He advanced in short rushes, stopping and crouching in cover every twenty yards or so, straining eyes and ears for sign of stalkers behind or an ambush before. Nothing happened. The night was quiet and peaceful. He saw a light go on in an upper window of Bittle's house, and the distant hiss of the surf mingled with the rustle of grasses brushed by the breeze, but there was neither sight nor sound of any human being.

"Damned odd!" said Templar to himself, scratching his head, as he lay under a hedge, watching and listening like a frontiersman, after at least a dozen of these rushes. "Flaming odd! Or did I slip them by going over the wall?"

He had fully expected to find some spicy parting gift waiting for him as soon as he had got far enough away from Bittle's vicinity, when they would be hoping to take him off his guard, but nothing had interfered with his departure, and there had been no trace of even the feeblest attempt to create trouble for him when he arrived in the narrow lane that ran between the Manor and Carn's house.

"Hell!" said the Saint, almost indignantly. "Now, why in blazes did they want to let me go?"

He had seen no lights in any of the Manor windows,

and with a sudden apprehension he looked at the luminous dial of his watch. He was already a couple of minutes overdue. He swung round and sprinted up the path to Carn's cottage. The Saint literally fell on the bell.

Chapter VII

THE FUN CONTINUES

IT WAS only a moment before Carn opened the door. Simon could have fallen on the detective's neck when he saw that Carn's features registered nothing more than a faint surprise, but he concealed his joy and assumed the slightly mocking smile that went with his Saintly pose.

"Thought I'd find you up," murmured the Saint. "Mind if I split a small lemonade with you?"

He had sidled past Carn into the miniature hall before the detective could answer, and Carn closed the front door resignedly.

"I didn't expect to be honoured again so soon, Mr. Templar," said the detective. "As a matter of fact, I've a visitor with me. . . ."

The last sentence was uttered in a tone that was intended to convey a gentle hint, as man of the world to man of the world, that the Saint should pause and consult his host before making himself at home, but the Saint had opened the door of the study before the detective had finished speaking.

"Why, it's Miss Holm!" exclaimed the Saint. "Fancy meeting you!" He turned to Carn, who was reddening silently on the threshold. "I hope I'm not interrupting a consultation, Doc? Throw me out of the

window if I cramp your style, won't you? I mean, people never stand on ceremony with me. . . ."

"As a matter of fact," said Carn, on the defensive, "Miss Holm simply came round for a chat."

"No? Really?" said the Saint.

"Yes!" returned Carn loudly.

"Well, well!" said Simon, who was enjoying himself hugely. "And how are we, Miss Holm?"

He was wondering just how much she had told Carn, and she read the unspoken question in his eyes, and answered it.

"In another minute——"

"I shall get my face smacked," the Saint took her up swiftly. "And quite right, too. Try to forgive me. I never could see an elastic leg without being irresistibly impelled to find out how far it would stretch."

He cast a reproachful glance at Carn which made the detective take on an even deeper purple hue. Then he was smiling at Patricia with a message that was not for broadcasting. It showed his complete satisfaction with the way things had fallen out. There must have been a difference of a couple of minutes between their watches, and those two minutes had been just long enough to save the beans from being spilled all over the place. And the smile added: "Well played, kid! I knew I could rely on you. And everything in the garden's lovely. . . . Which means, incidentally, that it's our job to lead Carn up the garden. Watch your step!" And the girl smiled back, to show that she understood —but there was rather more in her smile than that. It showed that she was very glad to see him again, and the Saint had a struggle to stop himself grabbing her up in his arms and kissing her on the strength of it.

"You seem to have been in the wars, Mr. Templar," remarked Carn, and the Saint nodded tolerantly.

"Didn't Miss Holm tell you?"

"I didn't feel I could ask her."

The Saint raised his eyebrows, for although the girl had made some effort to tidy herself it was still glaringly evident that she had not spent the evening playing dominoes in the drawing room. Carn explained.

"When I opened the door and saw her, I thought something had happened and she was coming to me for—er—first aid. But she said it was only for a chat, so I overcame my—'um—professional instincts, and said nothing. I rather think you were leading up to something when Mr. Templar came in, weren't you, Miss Holm? . . . I see that you were. But as a—er—um—ah——" Carn caught the Saint's accusing eye for the third time, and spluttered. "As a doctor," said Carn defiantly, "I was trained to let my patients make the running. The old school, but a good one. And then you arrive——"

The detective broke off with a gesture that comprehended Patricia's ragamuffin appearance and the Saint's own tattered clothes, and Simon grinned.

"So sad!" he drawled. "And now I suppose you'll be in agonies of curiosity for weeks."

Carn shrugged.

"That depends."

The detective was a passably good actor, but he was heavily handicapped by the suggestion of malicious glee that lurked in the Saint's twinkling eyes. And he dared not seem to notice that the Saint was quietly laughing at him because it was essential for him to maintain the rôle of Dr. Carn in the presence of a wit-

ness. Which goes some way to explain why his florid face remained more rubicund even than it normally was, and why there was a certain unnatural restraint in his voice.

Patricia was perplexed. She had expected to find that the Saint and Carn were familiar friends: instead, she found two men fencing with innuendo. It was beyond her to follow the subtleties of the duel, but there was no doubt that Simon was quite happy and Carn was quite annoyed, for it was indisputably the Saint's game.

"Shall I tell you all about it, Doc?" asked the Saint insinuatingly, for it was a weakness of his to exaggerate his pose to the borders of farce.

"Do," urged Carn, in an unguarded moment.

"I'll tell you," said Simon confidentially. "It was like this. . . ."

Carn drew nearer. The Saint frowned, blinked, scratched his head, and stared blankly at the detective.

"Do you know," said Simon, in simulated dismay, "it's a most extraordinary thing—I can't remember. Isn't that funny?"

The detective was understood to reply that he was not amused. He said other things, in a low voice that was none the less pregnant with emotion, for the Saint's ears alone, and Simon turned away with a pained expression.

"I don't agree," said Simon. "The Ten-Toed Tripe-Hopper is nothing like the Wall-Eyed Giraffe. Try Keating's."

"As a matter of fact," interposed Patricia, who felt that things looked like getting out of hand, "Mr. Templar's been with me most of the evening. We were taking a walk along by the cliff, and——"

Simon raised his hand.

"Hush!" he said. "Not before the Doc. You'll be putting ideas into his head."

"Grrrr," said Carn fiercely, which a man might well say when goaded to the limits of human endurance, and then he coughed energetically to cover it up.

"You see?" said the Saint. "You're embarrassing him."

Simon was perfect. His smiling, polished ease made Carn's red-faced discomfort look like an intentional effort of the detective to entertain a children's party with a few "faces" between the ice creams and the Punch and Judy, and Patricia was weak with suppressed laughter. It was unpardonable, of course, but it was the only way to dispose of Carn's burning curiosity. To have been secretive and mysterious, much as the Saint would have loved playing the part, would have been fatal.

Carn suddenly realized that he was being futile—that the elasticity of his leg was being sorely tried. The Saint had been watching for that, and instantly he became genuinely apologetic.

"Perhaps I ragged you a bit too much," he hastened to confess. "Really, though, you were asking for it, by being so infernally suspicious. Almost as if you suspected me of just having murdered somebody, or robbing the till of the village post office. It's really quite simple. Miss Holm and I were walking along the cliffs, and——"

"I fell over," Patricia explained, jumping in as soon as the Saint hesitated. "I landed on a ledge, and I wasn't seriously hurt, but Mr. Templar had an awful job getting me back."

Carn frowned. He had been badly had. The Saint's merciless leg pulling had achieved its object. So masterly was the transition from teasing to sober seriousness that the seriousness went unquestioned, and Carn swallowed whole a story that he would certainly have disbelieved if it had been told him in the first place without any nonsense.

"No offence, old thing," pleaded the Saint contritely. "I couldn't miss such a marvellous opportunity to make you imagine the worst."

Carn looked from one to the other; but Patricia, pulling her weight and more also, met the detective's searching stare unabashed, and the Saint's face displayed exactly what the Saint wanted it to display.

"I tried to tell you once," Patricia pointed out, "only Mr. Templar interrupted."

Simon flashed her a boatload of appreciation in a glance. Ye gods! What a girl! There wasn't an actress in the world who could have taught her anything about the kind of acting that gets over without any stage effects—she had every woman in every Secret Service in Europe skun a mile. There she was, cool as you please, playing up to her cue like an old hand. And, marvel of marvels, asking no questions. The Saint hadn't the foggiest notion why a girl he'd known only a couple of days should back him up like that, when every flag on the mast would have told any ordinary person that the Saint was more likely to be wrong than not. Ordinary respectable people did not go in for the hobbies that she had seen the Saint indulging in—like bending statuettes over millionaire knight's skulls after walking mysteriously out of the night through their library windows, or being chased round gardens by

men and bloodhounds, or chucking their lady friends over eight-foot walls. And yet she trusted him implicitly, took her line from him, and postponed the questions till afterward! And not the least remarkable fact was that the Saint, that consummate egotist, never thought of the obvious explanation. . . .

Carn reddened again, recovered his normal colour, and his stolid features gradually lost their strained appearance and relaxed into a wry smile.

"You certainly did try to save me, Miss Holm," he admitted. "You see, the Saint—that is, Mr. Templar—he's always running into trouble, and seeing him like that I couldn't help thinking of his habits. It didn't occur to me that you were with him—I was so dense it didn't strike me that you might have got mussed up at the same time as he did—and, of course, I know all about you, Miss Holm, so——"

"Half-time!" begged the Saint dazedly. "We're getting all tied up. Let's call it quits."

Carn nodded.

"Saint," he said, "it wasn't fair. I'm taking this game seriously, and that's quite bad enough without tangling it any more."

"That'll be all right," said the Saint heartily. "And now what about that Baby Polly we were going to split?"

Carn busied himself with decanter and glasses, and the Saint offered up a short prayer of thanksgiving. That was a nasty corner taken on two wheels in the devil of a skid, but they were round it somehow with the old bus still right side up, and the road looked pretty clear—at least as far as the next bend.

Simon caught the girl's eye while Carn's back was

turned. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders helplessly. The Saint grinned back and spread out his hands. Then, quite shamelessly, he blew her a kiss.

Carn brought the drinks, and the Saint raised his glass.

"Bung-ho troops," he said. "Here's to a good race, Carn."

The detective looked back.

"*Reasonably* good hunting, Saint," he replied grimly, and Simon grinned and drank.

"All things considered, worthy chirurgeon, I think——"

The Saint broke off at the sound of a thunderous knocking on the front door. Then a bell pealed long and insistently at the back of the house, and the knocking was resumed. Simon set down his glass carefully.

"You're popular to-night, son," he murmured. "Someone in a tearing hurry, too. Birth or death—what's the betting?"

"Hanged if I know," said Carn, and went out.

The Saint crossed the room swiftly and opened the casement windows wide, as an elementary precaution. Apparently the evening's party was not yet over. He had not the vaguest idea what the next move was going to be, but the air tingled with an electric foreboding that something was about to happen. The girl looked at him inquiringly. He dared not speak, but he signed to her to keep her end up and go on trusting him.

Outside, a voice which the Saint did not know was asking if Mr. Templar was there, and Carn answered. There was a tramp of heavy feet, and somebody arrived in the doorway. Simon was leaning on the mantel-

piece, looking the other way, a study in disinterested innocence.

"Ho," said the voice. "There 'e is."

The Saint looked up.

A man in uniform had entered, and the symptoms pointed to his being the village constable. Simon had not even realized that such an official existed in Baycombe, but that was undoubtedly what the gentleman with the pink face and the ill-fitting uniform was. The constable had clearly been dragged out of bed and rushed into his uniform—he was dishevelled, and his tunic was buttoned lopsidedly.

All these details the Saint observed in a slow surprised once-over. Then the policeman advanced importantly and clapped a hand on Simon's shoulder.

"I am Constable George 'Opkins," he said, "and if the Doctor will hixcuse me I shall arrest you on a charge of burglary annassault."

"Smoke!" said the Saint to himself.

That was a move! Simon seemed astonished and rather annoyed, as if he were wondering how the mistake had been made and was quite satisfied that it would be cleared up in a moment, but beneath his outward poise his mind was working at breakneck speed. The counter-attack and the rapidity with which it had been launched were worthy of the Tiger, but it was fighting over very thin ice.

"My good man, you're dippy!" said the Saint languidly. "Who makes this charge, anyway?"

"I do."

It was Bloem. Bloem with his leathery face perfectly composed, and just the ghost of a light of triumph in his slitted eyes betraying him. Bloem, walking past

Carn into the room with just the right shade of deference and just the right suggestion of regret for having to make a scene—but quite firmly the law-abiding citizen determined to do his duty and bring the criminal to justice.

"A thousand pardons, Doctor." Bloem bowed to Carn, and then turned and bowed to the girl. "I am deeply sorry, Miss Holm, that I should be compelled to do this in your presence. Perhaps you would like to retire for a minute. . . ."

Patricia tossed her head.

"Thanks—I'll stay," she said. "I'm sure there's a mistake, and perhaps I can help. I've been with Mr. Templar most of the evening."

Bloem's eyes rested long and significantly on the girl's torn frock and scratched arms, but she met his gaze boldly, and at last he turned away with a lift of shoulder and eyebrow.

"I'll explain," he said. "I was reading in my study, shortly after eleven this evening, when this man walked in. He threatened me with a revolver, making some remark which I did not understand. I am not a young man, but I have led a hard life, and I did not hesitate to grapple with him. He is very strong, however, and he managed to hit me with the butt of the revolver. I remember nothing more until the time when I came to and found him rifling my desk. Since he was armed, and had already beaten me once in a hand-to-hand tussle, I pretended to be still unconscious. He searched the room minutely, but apparently failed to find whatever it was he was looking for. When he left I followed him, and traced him here. Then I went and fetched Hopkins. That is the complete story."

"Anjew better come along quietly," advised the policeman, tightening his grip on the Saint's shoulder and holding his truncheon at the ready.

"Fine," said the Saint softly. "I should like to be searched now, so that your statement about the revolver can be verified."

Bloem smiled.

"You left it behind," he said. "Here it is."

Carn took the weapon from Bloem's hand and examined it.

"Belgian make," he said. "Is this yours, Mr. Templar?"

"It is not," answered Simon promptly. "I object to firearms on principle. They make such a noise."

"Come along," urged the constable, jerking the Saint forward.

Simon was not easily peeved, but one thing that made him see red was anybody trying to haze him. For a second he forgot his Saintly pose. He caught the policeman's wrist with both hands and twisted like an eel. There was a flurry of arms and legs, a yell, and George Hopkins landed with a crash on the other side of the room, with most of the breath knocked out of him.

The Saint straightened his tie, and looked bang into the muzzle of an automatic in Bloem's hand, but that he ignored.

"Anyone who wants a quiet life is advised to keep his filthy hands off me," murmured the Saint. "Don't do it again, son."

The constable was getting shakily to his feet.

"That's assaulting the police," he stormed.

"Oh, don't be childish," drawled the Saint, cool again. "When we want your little chatter we'll ask for

it. Just now, Bloem, we'll argue this out by ourselves. We can soon smash this cock-and-bull yarn of yours. One: were you alone in the house?"

"I was."

"Where was Algy?"

"He'd gone over to see Miss Holm."

That knocked the bottom out of a neat little alibi that the Saint had thought of trying to put over, but he did not show his disappointment.

"Two: didn't anyone follow me here with you?"

"I refuse to be cross-examined. I've told you I was alone——"

"You're talking," said the Saint coldly. "Don't. Be a good boy and just answer when you're spoken to. And the point is, if you've been quite alone all this time, as you say you have, what's your word against mine? Suppose I say I called in for a chat, and you stuck me up with that gun and tried to pinch my watch? Why shouldn't you be run in yourself?"

"Let 'im tell that to the judge," growled the constable.

"I think," said Bloem acidly, "that my reputation will survive your wild accusations."

The Saint was not impressed.

"We had a stand-up fight, did we?" he went on. "I grant you I look as if I'd been in some rough stuff. Now suppose you take off that mac and let's see how you came out of it."

Bloem smiled, a little wearily, and unbuttoned his coat. The Saint's lips tightened. Bloem certainly had a convincing air of having been violently handled, and that put the Tiger another point to the good. Simon saw the Tiger's score soaring skyward at an alarming rate,

but the only effect of that was to key up his own nerves, while his easy and confident manner never faltered. There were still a few more minutes to play.

"It's rather hopeless, isn't it?" said Bloem.

He was appealing to the audience, and the constable grunted his agreement.

"What was this remark you didn't understand?" asked Carn. "When he—as you say—threatened you with the revolver."

"It was most mysterious," said Bloem. "He said: 'I'm looking for the tiger's den, and I think I'm getting warm.' I still can't make out what he meant."

Simon fished out his cigarette case and began to tap a cigarette thoughtfully on his thumbnail. Apparently bored with the whole proceeding, he nevertheless saw Carn's face become a mask. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Bloem, and the Boer's bland demeanour almost took his breath away. The colossal audacity of that last statement was the crowning stroke to a truly masterly bluff. The Saint wondered if Carn himself was suspect, but Bloem's gaze rested only on the Saint. No—the gang knew nothing about Carn's real profession. Bloem was simply taking a vindictive pleasure in kicking the man whom he thought he had got where he wanted him.

And it looked dangerously as if he had got the Saint tied hand and foot and gagged. Patricia could not help him, and Carn could not—even if he cared to. It was Bloem's word against Simon's, and there was no doubt which the Bench would prefer to accept. And Bloem knew that the Saint knew that any reference to the evening's entertainment at Bittle's would be futile. Bittle would lie like a Trojan, and the Tiger was sure to have

provided him with a plausible explanation of the noise that had occurred earlier that night.

The Saint grasped the consummate efficiency of the Tiger's tactics. Simon was to be shopped, and the shopping had been slickly done. He would be lucky to get away with six months' hard—and taken in conjunction with the assault upon the police in the execution of its duty the whole charge sheet might well put the Saint behind bars for upward of a year. And in that time T. T. Deeps could be salted, and the Tiger Cubs could fade gracefully away. The Saint lounged even more languidly against the mantelpiece. This last deal had certainly given the Tiger one Hades of a hand.

Yet indisputably the Saint dominated the situation. They were all waiting for him. Bloem, watching him through narrowed lids, and still training the automatic upon him, was utterly confident of the strength of his combination. He was just waiting for the Saint to confess defeat. The constable, more wary after his taste of the Saint's anger, was hanging about in the background waiting for somebody else to start the next dance. Patricia was looking anxiously at the Saint, powerless to help him, and wondering if any daring sideslip was being planned behind that lazy exterior. The one certain thing was that she did not believe Bloem's story for an instant. At any other time she might have credited it, but seen in the light of previous events that evening it savoured of nothing but the complicated web of mystery which had caught her up in its meshes and which threatened her Saint with the most sinister things. And Carn had nothing to say. As far as Bloem's story was concerned it might or might not be true—his knowledge of the Saint inclined him to

believe it. But in any case the Saint was working against him, even if he was also working against the Tiger. And to have disclosed himself as Central Detective Inspector Carn of Scotland Yard would have written Finis to every chance he had of succeeding on his mission.

"We're waiting," said Bloem at last.

"So I see," drawled Simon. "If you can wait a bit longer, there are just one or two more points to clear up. The first is that I'm sure you won't mind the Doctor just examining the bump I must have raised on your cranium when I knocked you out."

He was watching Bloem closely as he spoke, and his heart sank when he saw that the man was not at all put out. Carn walked up to Bloem with a query, and Bloem nodded.

"Just behind my left ear," he said.

"Sweetest lamb," said the Saint through his teeth, "I'll bet you just hated getting that bit of realism!"

Carn looked at the Saint and shrugged.

"Someone certainly hit him very hard," he said. "Saint, you've put your foot in it this time."

"So I don't think we'll prolong this unpleasant duty," said Bloem briskly. "Constable—you have the handcuffs? I'm covering him, and I shall shoot if he attacks you again."

And then the congregation was increased by one, for a man strutted out of the darkness and stood framed in the open window.

" 'Ere, wassal this?" demanded Orace truculently.

Chapter VIII

THE SAINT IS DENSE

BLOEM wheeled with a smothered exclamation, for the interruption came from behind him. Then the Boer slowly lowered his automatic—because Orace was carrying the enormous revolver which was his pride and joy, and that fearsome weapon was waving in a gentle semicircle so that it covered everyone in the room in turn. Orace leaned on the windowsill, well pleased with the timeliness of his entrance and the sensation it had caused.

"Snoldup," declared Orace brightly. "Ni jus' come in the nicker time. Looks like a dangerous carrickter, too. Orfcer," said Orace, with a lordly sweep of his free hand, "you 'ave the bracelets. Do yer dooty!"

"My good fellow——"

Orace waggled the blunderbuss threateningly in Bloem's direction.

"Lay orf 'me good fellerin' ' me!" commanded Orace ferociously. "Caught in the yack, that's wot you are, an' jer carn't wriggle out av it! Constible! Wot the thunderin' 'ell are yer wytin' for? Look slippy an' clap the joolry on 'im! An' jew jusurryup an' leggo that popgun, or I'll plugya!"

Bloem let the automatic fall, and the Saint picked it up, in case of accidents.

"I can explain," persisted Bloem.

"Corse yer can," agreed Orace, scornful. "Never knew a crook 'oo couldn't."

"Oh, but he can," said the Saint. "You can stop flourishing that cannon, Orace, and come right in. I was just wondering how to get hold of you."

Orace looked doubtful, but eventually he obeyed, clambering lamely over the sill and treating Bloem to a menacing glare as he did so.

"Yessir?"

"A simple case of mistaken identity," remarked the Saint to the assembled company, in the manner of counsel opening the defence. "But Mr. Bloem was so very obstinate. . . . Well, this is Orace, late of His Majesty's Royal Marines, and my servant for years. Orace will now testify that I reached home just after eleven, and didn't leave again until about twenty to twelve."

The Saint did not even look at Orace as he spoke, for he knew his man. Carn, however, did, and saw Orace register surprise.

"Tha's so," said Orace. " 'Oo said yer didn't?"

"You see," Simon explained, "Mr. Bloem there was held up by an armed man to-night, and he had the idea that it was me, so he's been trying to arrest me."

Orace nodded, tilting his head away from Bloem as if the man offended his nostrils.

"Ar," said Orace derisively. "The idea!"

The Saint turned to Bloem.

"Perhaps you will now apologize?" he suggested. "Come, Mr. Bloem, admit that you didn't get a good view of your assailant, and for reasons of your own you jumped to the conclusion that it was me. He might even have been masked. . . ."

The two men's eyes met. There was no misconstruing the Saint's meaning. He was offering Bloem a graceful retreat. Bloem knew that he had weakened his case by confessing that no one but himself had seen the bandit, and his story would never hold water in the face of Simon's alibi. Orace was the one factor which the Tiger, by some incomprehensible oversight, had utterly overlooked. It might even be said that only Orace's arrival at that precise moment made him a factor to be considered: if any time had elapsed between the arrest and its coming to Orace's ears, Orace might by then have been trapped into admitting that he had not seen the Saint since dinner, and possibly the Tiger had banked on some such manœuvre. But Orace had turned up just when he was wanted, which he had an uncanny gift for doing, and thereby he had upset the Tiger's applecart irretrievably.

And Bloem knew it. He did not show it with a muscle of his face, but his eyes glowed venomously. And the Saint, smiling a little, gazed back with a little blue devil of unholy glee dancing about just behind his lazily lowered lids. For the Saint was thinking of the whack behind the ear which Bloem had suffered for the good of the cause, and that thought made his ribs ache with noiseless laughter. . . .

"I am deeply humiliated," said Bloem in a strangled voice. "As a matter of fact, the man was masked. I let him leave the room, and then followed. When I came out of the garden, I saw Mr. Templar walking away, and immediately concluded that it was he. The real man must have gone off in another direction. I apologize."

"I accept your apology, Mr. Bloem," said the Saint stiffly. "Don't let it occur again."

His dignity was terrific, and for that shrewd cut he was rewarded with a look from Bloem which ought by rights to have made him vanish in a puff of smoke, leaving a small greasy stain on the carpet, but the Saint's armour was impregnable.

"I'm very sorry, Doctor," said Bloem unevenly. "Try to forgive me, Miss Holm. I'd better go."

The Saint stepped up with the automatic.

"You might need this, with a hold-up man in the neighbourhood," he murmured mockingly. "If you meet him again, I trust you will not spare the lead."

Bloem gazed back malignantly.

"You need have no fear of that, Mr. Templar," he replied.

He was just going out when Mr. Hopkins awoke to the realization that he had been cheated of the glory of arresting an armed desperado, and that this coolly smiling man who was getting off scot-free had flung him across the room, bruised and shaken him severely, and nearly broken his arm.

"'Ere," said the constable, whose idiom was much the same as that of Orace, "wassal this? Whatever you say, that don't dispose of the charge of assaultin' the police."

"When an innocent man is treated like a criminal," said Simon virtuously, "he may be pardoned for losing his temper. I'm sure Mr. Bloem will agree with me? . . . In fact," added the Saint, taking Mr. Hopkins coaxingly by the arm, "I'm sure that if you mentioned the matter to Mr. Bloem, he'd stand you a glass of milk and put a penny in your money box. Wouldn't you, Mr. Bloem?"

"Naturally," said Bloem, without enthusiasm, "naturally I must accept the responsibility for that."

"Spoken like a gent," approved the Saint. "Now toddle along and talk big business under the stars, like good children."

And he urged Bloem and the constable toward the door. They went obediently, for different reasons. It was a victory that the Saint could not help rubbing in.

He slammed the front door on the pair, and returned hilariously.

"Honour is vindicated, *mes enfants,*" he said happily. "What about splitting another lemonade on it, Carn?"

The detective looked at the Saint and nodded slowly.

"I think we might," he assented. "Such luck ought to be celebrated. I suppose it would be indiscreet to ask how Orace came to arrive so fortunately?"

"But why indiscreet?" cried the Saint. "All's fair and above board. Orace, tell the gentleman how you happened to blow in on your cue."

Orace cleared his throat.

"Being accustomed to take a constitooshnal," he began, in the stilted langu age which he would have employed before his orderly officer, "I'm in the 'abit of walking this wy of a nevenin'; and the winder bein' open an' me 'avin' good eyesight——"

"Of course I believe you," said Carn. "You deserve to be believed. There's some whisky in the kitchen, Orace."

Orace saluted and marched out, and the Saint doubled up with silent mirth.

"Orace is unique," he said.

"Orace is all that, and then some," Carn returned ruefully.

Soon afterward Simon and Patricia left. They walked the short distance to the Manor without speaking, for the Saint was enjoying the novel experience of finding his flow of small talk entirely dried up. He had thought of nothing to say until the girl was opening the door, and then he could only make a postponement.

"May I see you to-morrow morning?" he asked.

"Of course."

"I'll come right after breakfast."

Suddenly she remembered Agatha Girton.

"I think—would you mind if I came over to you instead?"

"I'd love you to. And if I haven't bored you to tears by then, you can stay for lunch. Tell me what time you'll be leaving, and I'll send Orace over to fetch you."

She was surprised.

"Is that necessary?"

"Very necessary," replied the Saint gravely. "Tigers have nasty suspicious minds, just like me, and by this time one Tiger is wondering just how dangerous you are, Pat. Yes, I know it's screamingly funny, but let me send Orace—for my own peace of mind."

"Well—— About half-past ten, if you like."

"I do. And Orace will adore it. One other thing. Will you do me a great favour?"

She had found the switch in the hall, and she turned on the light to see his face better, but he was not joking.

"Lock your door, and put the key under the pillow. Don't open to anybody—not even your aunt. I don't

really think anything'll happen so soon, but Tigers can hustle. Will you?"

She nodded.

"You're very alarming," she said.

"I'm full of ideas to-night," he said. "I've had a taste of the Tiger's speed, and nobody ever stung the Saint in the same way twice. Don't believe any messages except they're brought by Orace. Don't trust anybody but me, Orace, or old Carn at a pinch. I know its a tall order, but there are one or two rough days—not to mention rough nights—in store for the old brigade. You've been perfectly marvellous so far. Can you keep it up?"

"I'll try," she said.

He took her hand.

"God bless you, Pat, old pal."

"Saint——"

He was going when she stopped him. It was odd to hear that nickname fall from her lips—the name wherewith the Saint had been christened in strange and ugly places, by hard and godless men. He had grown so used to it that he had come to accept it without question, but now the sound of it brought a flood of memories. Once again he stood in the Bosun's smoky bar at the back of Mexico City, looking from the huddled corpse of Senhor Miguel Grasiento to the girl called Cherry, and heard the *rurales* pounding on the door. He had got her away, on an English tramp bound for Liverpool. " 'Saint,' " she had said—"that was a true word spoken in jest." And he had never heard that name uttered in the same tone since until that moment. . . .

"Saint, did you really go to Bloem's?"

"I did not," he answered. "That was a frame-up. But Mynheer Bloem is certainly one of the Tiger Cubs. Watch him! I'll tell you the whole yarn to-morrow. Bye-bye, kid."

The Saint found Orace in the lane, curled up under the hedge, philosophically smoking his pipe.

"We'll work inland round the village," said Simon. "I'm hoping the Tiger's had enough for one night, but you never know. Nobody's got any proof that Bloem was lying about that hold-up merchant, except me, and a fairy tale like that cuts both ways. If our bodies were found in a field in the morning, the whole thing'd fit in beautifully."

Nevertheless, they were not molested on the way back—a fact which might well have been due to the Saint's foresight. It took an hour of the Saint's killing pace to do the journey which would have lasted only fifteen minutes by the obvious route, and even then Simon was not satisfied.

When the outline of the Pill Box loomed dimly up against the dark sky, he stopped.

"Booby traps have caught mugs before now," he murmured. "Just park yourself in the nettles here, Orace, while I snoop round."

The Saint could have given most shikars points when it came to moving across country without being noticed. Orace simply saw a tall shape melt soundlessly away into the gloom, and thereafter could trace nothing until the tall shape materialized again beside him.

"All clear," said Simon. "That means our Tiger's burning the midnight oil thinking out something really slick and deadly."

The Saint was right. Although he and Orace never

relaxed their vigilance, taking it in turns to sleep and keep watch, they were left in peace. The Tiger had taken one blind shot, and it had not come off. Moreover, if his organization had been only a shade less thorough, it might have landed him in the tureen. As it was, he had come out of the encounter none too well. And for the future he intended to have his moves mapped out well in advance, with every possible setback and development legislated for.

None of these reflections disturbed the Saint's sleep. He had taken the first watch, and so the sun was shining gaily through the embrasures when he awoke for the second time, to find Orace setting a cup of tea down by his bedside.

"Nice morning," remarked Orace, according to ritual, and vanished again.

Since the episode of the bullet out of the blue, Simon had reluctantly decided to forgo his morning dip until the air had become clearer. However, he skipped and shadow-boxed in the sun with especial vigour, and finished up with Orace splashing a couple of buckets of water over him, what time the Saint lay on the grass drawing deep grateful breaths and blessing his perfect condition. For the Saint saw a fierce and wearing scrap ahead, and he reckoned that he would need all his strength and stamina if he was going to be on his feet when the gong clanged for the last round.

"Brekfuss narf a minnit," said Orace.

The Saint was grinning as he dressed. Orace was nearly too good to be true.

They were late that morning, and Orace left to fetch Patricia as soon as he had served "brekfuss." The girl arrived in half an hour, to find the Saint spread-eagled

in a deck chair outside the Pill Box. He had managed to unearth another pair of flannel bags and another shooting jacket that were nearly as disreputable as the outfit which had been wrecked in Bittle's garden the night before, and he looked very fresh and comfortable, for his shirt, as usual, would have put snow to shame.

He jumped up and held out both his hands, and she gave him both of hers.

"I haven't seen you for ages," he said. "How are we?"

"Fine," she told him. "And nothing happened."

She was cool and slim in white, and he thought he had never seen anyone half so lovely.

"Something might have," he said. "And when I was a Boy Scout they taught me to Be Prepared."

He rigged a chair for her and adjusted the cushions, and then he sat down again.

"I know you're bursting with curiosity," he said, "so I'll come straight to the 'osses."

And without further ado he started on the long history. He told her about Fernando, dying out in the jungle with a Tiger Cub's kris in him, and he told her Fernando's story. He told her about the Tiger, who was for years Chicago's most brilliant and terrible gang leader. He told her about some of the Tiger's exploits, and finally came to the account of the breaking of the Confederate Bank. Some of the details Fernando had told him; the rest he had gathered together by patient investigation; the accumulation worked up into a plot hair-raising enough to provide the basis of the wildest film serial that was ever made.

"The Tiger's very nearly a genius," he said. "The

way he got away with that mint of money and carted it all the miles to here is just a sample of his brain."

Then he told her about the more recent events—the little he had learned while he had been in Baycombe. How he had been suspected from the day of his arrival, and how he had done his best to encourage that suspicion, in the hope that the other side would give themselves away trying to dispose of him. Gradually the lie of the land took shape in her mind, while the Saint talked on, putting in a touch of character here and there, recalling points that he had omitted, and referring to details that he had not yet given. The story was not told smoothly—it rattled out, paused, and rattled on again, decorated with the Saint's typical racy idiom and humorous egotism. Nevertheless, it held her, and it was a convincing story, for the Saint had a gift for graphic description. She saw the scenes at which she had been present in a new light.

He ended up with a flippant account of the sport *chez* Bittle after he had helped her get away.

"And there you have it," he concluded. "Heard in cold blood, with the sun shining and all that, it sounds preposterous enough to make dear old Munchausen look like gospel. But you've seen a bit of it yourself, and perhaps that'll make it easier for you to believe the rest. And what it boils down to is that the Tiger is in Baycombe, and so am I, and so are the pieces of eight; and the Tiger wants my head on a tin tray, and I want his ill-gotten gains, and we're both pretty keen to hang on to our respective possessions. So, taken by and large, it looks like we shall come to blows and other Wild and Woolly Western expressions of mutual ill feeling. And the point is, Pat, and the reason why I felt

you had a right to know all the odds—is that you've gone and cut in on the game. By last night, the Tiger had to face the risk that I might have talked to you, and the way you behaved generally won't have eased his mind any. You might be a danger or you might not, but he can't afford to take chances. To be on the safe side, he's got to assume that you and I are as thick as thieves. So you see, old soul, you're slap in the middle of this here jamboree, whether you like it or not. You're cast for second juvenile lead in the bloodcurdling melodrama now playing, and your name's up in red lights all round the Tiger's den—and the question before the house is, What Do We Do About It?"

He was leaning forward so that he could see her face, and she knew that he was desperately serious. She knew also, instinctively, that he was not a man to exaggerate the situation, however much he might play the buffoon in other directions.

"Now, here's my suggestion," said the Saint. "I know a bloke called Terry Mannering, who lives on the other side of Devonshire, and he can deal with fun and games as well as I can. He has a wife, whom you'll love, and a very good line in yachts, being nearly as rich as I should like to be since his Old Man kicked the bucket. If I took you over and told Terry that it'd be good for all your healths if you went cruising way off for a few months, till the tumult and the shouting dies, so to speak, and the Tigers and their Cubs depart—well, I know the three of you'd be on the high seas in no time. And the Tiger and I would be rude to each other for a bit, and when it was all over and he was decently buried I'd let you know and you could come back. What about it?"

Patricia studied her shoe; and she said, in a very Saintly way:

"What, indeed?"

"You said?" rapped Simon.

"What about it?" queried Patricia. "It might be rather a good idea some time, but you can't rush it like that. Besides, I'm rather enjoying myself in Baycombe."

Simon got up.

"Well, I'm not enjoying your enjoyment," he said bluntly. "That sort of courage is all very fine when it's to some purpose—but this time it isn't. I've never dragged a woman into my little worries yet, and I'm not starting now. Perhaps you think this is going to be a picnic. I thought I'd made it plain enough that it isn't. If you want to pack a few thrills into your young life, I'll arrange a big-game shooting trip, or something else comparatively tame, later. But this particular spree is not in your line one bit, and you'd better be sensible and admit it."

Patricia raised her eyebrows.

"So I gather you propose to kidnap me," she said calmly. "I believe 'shanghai' is the word. Well, I should start planning right away—because nothing short of that is going to move me."

"You're a damned fool," said the Saint.

She laughed, standing up to him and laying a hand on his shoulders.

"Dear man," she said, "I refuse to lose my temper, because I know that's just what you want me to do. You think that if you're rude enough I'll dash off and leave you to stew. And I can promise you I shan't do anything of the sort. I know it isn't going to be a picnic

—but I'm sorry if you think I'm a girl that's only fit for picnics. I've always fancied myself as the heroine of a hell-for-leather adventure, and this is probably the only chance I shall ever have. And I'm jolly well going to see it through!"

Something held him in check with an effort. He had a frantic impulse to take this stubborn slip of a girl across his knee and spank some sense into her; and coincidently with that he had an equally importunate desire to hug her and kiss her to death. For there was no doubt that she was determined to ride on to the kill, however dangerous the country her obstinate intention led her over. Why she should be so set on it beat the Saint. He could imagine a high-spirited girl fancying herself as the heroine of just such an adventure, but he had never dreamed of meeting a girl who'd go on fancying herself quite so keenly when it came to the point, and when she'd had a peek at some of the stern and spiky disadvantages. But there she was, smiling into his eyes, tranquilly announcing her resolution to see the shooting match through with him, and boldly averring that she was perfectly prepared to eat the whole cake as well as the icing. She was going to be the blazes of a nuisance and the mischief of a worry to him—"But, hell!" swore the Saint to himself—"I'm darn glad of it!" Wherein he betrayed his egotism. It would be a gruelling test for her, but he'd have her with him all the time. And if she came through it with flying colours, well, maybe after all he'd go the way of most confirmed bachelors. . . .

And since he saw that neither cajoling nor cursing would budge her, he accepted the situation like a wise man. And even then (with such an inferiority complex

is Love afflicted) the sublime egotist did not spot the foundation of her determination, though it stuck out a mile. Nevertheless, in his blindness he was very near to blundering straight into the heart of the affair. His scowl relaxed, and he took her hand from his shoulder and held it.

"I've known some fool women," said the Saint, "but I never met one whose foolishness appealed to me more than yours."

"Then—it's a bet?" she asked.

He nodded.

"You said it, partner. And the Lord grant we win. It's not my fault if you insist on jazzing into the Tiger's den, but it'll be my unforgivable fault if I don't yank you out again safely. Shake!"

"Bless you," said Patricia softly.

Chapter IX

PATRICIA PERSEVERES

"WELL," remarked Simon Templar, breaking a long silence as lightly as he could, "where do we go from here, old Pat?"

She disengaged her hand and sat down again; and he shifted his own chair round so that they were knee to knee. She was chilled by the definiteness with which he reverted to pure business, though later she realized that he did so only because he was afraid of letting himself go, and possibly incurring her displeasure by forcing the pace.

"I've also a story to tell," she said, "and it came out only last night."

And she gave him a full account of Agatha Girton's confession.

For such a loquacious man, he was an astonishingly attentive listener. It was a side of his character which she had not seen before—the Saint concentrating. He did not interrupt her once, sitting back with his eyes shut and his face so composed that he might well have been asleep. But when she had finished he was frowning thoughtfully.

"Curiouser and curiouser," said the Saint. "So Aunt Aggie is one of the bhoys? But what in the sacred name of haggis could anyone blackmail Aunt Aggie with?

Speaking quite reverently, I can't imagine she was ever ravishing enough, even in her prime, to acquire anything like a Past."

"It does seem absurd, but——"

The Saint scratched his head.

"What do you know about her?"

"Very little, really," Patricia replied. "I've sort of always taken her for granted. My mother died when I was twelve—my father was killed hunting three years before that—and she became my guardian. I never saw much of her until quite recently. She spent most of her time abroad, on the Riviera. She had a villa at Hyères. I stayed on at school very late, and I was generally alone here during the holidays—I mean, she was away, though I usually had school friends staying with me, or I stayed with them. She didn't do much for me, but my bills were paid regularly, and she wrote once a fortnight."

"When did she settle down in Baycombe, then?"

"When she came back from South Africa. About six years ago I had a letter from her from Port Said saying that she was on her way to the Cape. She was away a year, and I hardly had a line from her. Then one day she turned up and said she'd had enough of travelling and was going to live at the Manor."

"And did she?"

"She used to go abroad occasionally, but they were quite short trips."

"When was the last expedition?"

She pondered.

"About two years ago, or a bit less. I can't remember the exact date."

"Now think," suggested the Saint—"roughly, you

hardly saw her at all between the time she introduced herself as your guardian, when you were twelve, until she came back from South Africa, when you were sixteen or seventeen."

"Nearer seventeen."

"And in that time anything might have happened." She shrugged.

"I suppose so. But it's too ridiculous. . . ."

"Of course it is," agreed Simon blandly. "It's all too shriekingly ridiculous for words. It's ridiculous that our Tiger should have broken the Confederate Bank of Chicago and lugged the moidores over to Baycombe to await disposal. It's ridiculous to think that there are some hundredweights of twenty-two carat gold hidden somewhere not two miles from here. But there are. What we've got to assume is that on this joy ride nothing is too ridiculous to be real. Which reminds me—what do you know about the old houses in Baycombe? There must be something conspicuously old enough for Fernando to have thought the Old House was sufficient address."

He was surprised at her immediate answer.

"There are two that'd fit," she said. "One is just out of the village, inland. It used to be an inn, and the name of it was the Old House. It's falling to bits now—the proprietor lost his license in the year Dot, and nobody took it over. It's supposed to be haunted. The windows are all boarded up, and a dozen men could live there without being seen if they went in and out at night."

The Saint smashed fist into palm, his eyes lighting up.

"Moonshine and Moses!" he whooped. "Pat, you're worth a fortune to this partnership! And I was just

thinking we'd come to a standstill. Why, we haven't moved yet! . . . What's the other one?"

"The island just round the point." She waved her arm to the east. "The fishermen call it the Old House, but you wouldn't have noticed it because it only looks like that from the sea. The sides are very steep, and on one side it juts right out over the water, like those old houses where the first floor is bigger than the ground floor."

Simon jumped up and walked to the edge of the cliff, so that he could see the island. It was about a mile from the shore—nothing but an outcrop of rock thickly overgrown with bushes and stunted trees. He came back jubilant.

"It might be either," he said exultantly, "or it might be both—the Tiger may have a home from home in your defunct pub, and he may have parked the doubloons on the island. Anyway, we'll draw both covers and see. Thinking it over, I guess I've hit it. The Tiger'd want to have the gold some place he could ship it from easily—remember, it's got to go to Africa. And by the same token . . . Here, hold on half a sec."

He disappeared into the Pill Box and came back in a moment with field glasses. Then he focussed on the horizon and began to sweep it carefully from west to east. He had covered three quarters of the arc when he stopped and stared for a full minute, suddenly rigid.

"And there she blows," he muttered.

He handed her the binoculars and pointed north-east.

"See what you make of it."

"It looks like a couple of masts sticking up."

"Motor ship—no funnels," he explained. "The

Bristol shipping passes here, but we're back in a sort of big bay, and I don't think they'd stand in as near as that. But we'll just make sure."

He took the glasses from her again and went into the Pill Box, and she followed. He fossicked about in the kitchen till he found a piece of board, the remains of a packing case, and this he settled in one of the embrasures, truing it up level with little wedges of newspaper. Then he put the field glasses on it and took a sight on one of the masts by means of a couple of pins stuck in the board.

"We'll give her five minutes."

She grasped his meaning at once.

"You think they're waiting to come in after dark?"

"No less. Comrade Bloem hasn't done all he'd like to with T. T. Deeps, but he'll have some weeks' grace while the stuff's getting to the mine. And he daren't let it lie around here any longer, in case my luck holds and I don't get bumped off according to schedule. I've rattled the Tiger!"

He was keeping an eye on his watch, and the minutes ticked away very slowly.

"Is Dr. Carn a detective?" she asked.

"That's hit it in one," affirmed the Saint. "But don't let on you know. It wouldn't be sporting not to give the old boy a fair run."

"Then aren't you a detective?" she stammered in bewilderment. "I thought you were friendly rivals—that was the only explanation I could work out last night."

The Saint smiled grimly.

"Rivals—more or less friendly—yes," he said. "But I'm not a detective, and never was. I'm playing for my

own hand, with an enormous quantity of ha'pence coming to me if I win, and everybody's kicks if I lose. Profession, gentleman adventurer: i. e., available for any job involving plenty of money and plenty of trouble, suitable for a man who doesn't bother much about the letter of the law and who's prepared to take his licking without a yelp if he gets landed. That's me. Like this. I happened to find Fernando, and as soon as I'd got the thing taped out I took a trip to Chicago and saw the boss of the Confederate. 'Here's nearly a year since your strong room was busted,' I said, 'and the dicks haven't brought you back one cent of the almighties. Now suppose you let me have a shot. Terms, twenty per cent. commission if I bring it off. Not a bean if I don't. Me to work on my lonesome, without reporting to anybody, and to take all the blame if I'm run over.' Well, that put them on something to nothing, so they bit. And there you are."

He was looking steadily at her, but she did not change colour. But the Saint was never a faker, and this was his call to clean the whole sheet, so that she could take it or leave it as she chose and would never be able to say he hadn't played square. He rubbed it in with brutal directness:

"That's the way I've lived for years. Pretty well, all things considered, so that if this gamble turns up I'll be able to retire and settle down as soon as I like, and not have to stint myself anywhere. In those years I've committed about half the crimes in the Calendar, at the expense of crooks. It's a sporting game—man to man, and devil take the mug: and the police, for obvious reasons, aren't invited to interfere by either side. Bloem's the first to break that rule; but the Tiger

isn't a sportsman—he's just a pot hunter. Still, I doubt if your friends would appreciate my success in that career. D'you still want to be a partner in the firm?"

She sighed.

"Saint, you're an ass," she said. "And if you exhibit any symptoms of virulent imbecility I shall fire you and become managing director myself."

"Hell's bells," ejaculated Simon, unwontedly moved, and swung away.

Very carefully, so as not to disturb the board, he took another sight at the ship's masts; and presently he straightened up with a light of triumph breaking on his face.

"We're in luck," he said. "She hasn't shifted a millimetre. Rotten bad navigation. I'd have known the height of my masts to an inch, and the height of the cliffs here ditto, and I'd have figured out my position to six places of decimals. . . . But the Tiger's loss is our gain!"

"They'll start to come in at sunset," she took him up excitedly. "And——"

"And I'll be there," said the Saint. "It's a moonlight swim for me to-night. That's great—to let the Tiger Cubs themselves lead me to the cache! But the snag is . . . Holy Habakkuk . . . they'll be waiting for me." She stared. "They know I'll invite myself, bless it!"

"Why?"

"Because they know I'm wise to this Old House joke. I let on, like a fool. That was a poisonous bad bloomer! I was ragging old Bloem about Fernando, just seeing how much breeze I could put up him, and I mentioned the Old House. They'll think I knew exactly what and where it was. Oh, crumbs and crutches! D'you mind kicking me as hard as you can?"

She was as distressed as he was. It was in no half-hearted manner that she had enlisted in the army of adventurers. A setback stung her as much as anybody. She bit her lip.

"But they're coming in," she insisted.

"Yes—forewarned and forearmed to the teeth. If I happen to have been a bit slow on the uptake, well and good. If I haven't, and think I'll butt in, they'll be ready for me. Maybe the Tiger's patting himself on the back right now, bucked to death with his dandy little scheme for getting away with the oof and me too. Well, it's up to me to hand him the jar of his life. Sit tight a shake while I think."

He dropped into a chair and lighted a cigarette, his brain reeling and humming to encompass this new twist to the problem. Undoubtedly he had sized it up right—the Tiger was giving himself a double chance. And that move had got to be baulked somehow. But how? The Saint had only to breathe a word to Carn, and the Tiger was dished. But then, so was the Saint. That put that out of bounds.

He was fully prepared to swim out to the Old House that night, with Anna strapped to his arm, and trust to the inspiration of the moment to show him a way of beating the gang, even if they were watching and waiting for him. That was an honest toss-up with sudden death, and Simon took risks of that stamp without turning a hair. But on the other hand he liked to have at least a shadowy loophole for emergencies—there was no point in chucking the game away for lack of a little forethought. And how to provide that loophole? The Tiger's forces were large: the Saint could reckon on only Orace and the girl, besides himself.

And he didn't want to push a slip of a girl into the front line, however keen she might be to go. How to make three people—or nearer two and a half—do the work of a platoon was a poser worthy of the undivided attention of a great general. Manifestly, it could not be done by any ordinary means. Therefore, there must be subtlety.

And the Tiger had the added advantage of being the attacker. Simon's cigarette began to smoulder down in his fingers unnoticed. That was a point! The Tiger was sitting high and dry in his den, hatching plots and making raids and forays when the spirit moved him; while the Saint had to sit on the fence with his eyes skinned, just parrying the Tiger's thrusts. And it became clear to the Saint that there was something unfair about that arrangement. True, the Saint had made one attack—but why let the offensive stop there? The enemy had an idea that he would come lunging in again that night: well, so he might, if it looked like a good tussle and he felt in the mood. But that didn't imply an armistice until zero hour, by any manner of means. Quite a lot of skirmishing could take place before the big battle—and every blow of it would bother the Tiger and help harass his organization for the last rounds. There really was no earthly reason why the Tiger should have it all his own way.

Where to launch the attack? The other Old House sprang to his mind at once. They might be expecting him to turn up there, but they would hardly anticipate his arrival in broad daylight. Which was just the way he might catch them on the hop. Or the dilapidated inn might be a false scent—in which case there was nothing but the state of his own nerves to stop him

paying a call on Bloem. The prospects began to look brighter, and suddenly the Saint sat up with a broad grin illuminating his face.

"I've very nearly got it," he announced.

"Do let's hear!"

She was flushed and eager, eyes sparkling, lips slightly parted, like a splendid young Diana. She made a picture that in the abstract would have delighted the pagan Saint, but in the concrete it brought him up with a jerk. Next thing he knew she'd be demanding to be allowed to accompany him on the whole tour.

"Simply the germ of an idea to wallop the Tiger Cubs when they come in for the spondulicks," he lied, thinking furiously. "You see, gold's shocking weighty stuff, so they'll have to ferry it to the ship in small doses. That'll mean they'll have about three of the ship's boats running in relays—if they tried to take too big a load at once it'd simply drop through the bottom. And the crew'll be pretty small. A motor ship doesn't take much running, and they'd want to keep the numbers down in any case, because the seaman who can be relied on not to gossip in port is a rare bird. If we're lucky, the skipper'll be ashore getting his orders from the Tiger, and that'll make one less to tackle. Otherwise, the Tiger'll go aboard himself, and that'll be one more to pip—though the fish'll be worth the extra trouble of landing. In any event, the general idea is this: we're going to have a stab at pinching that hooker!"

The Saint was capable of surprising himself. That plan of campaign, rigged out on the spur of the moment to put the girl off the main trail, caught hold of his imagination even as he improvised it. He ended on a

note of genuine enthusiasm, and found that she was wringing his hands joyfully.

"That's really brilliant," she bubbled. "Oh, Saint, it's going to be the most fearfully thrilling thing that ever happened—if we can only bring it off!"

He gazed sadly down at her. There it was—a tank of mulligatawny big enough to drown a brontosaurus, and he'd fallen right in before he knew what was happening. He shook his head.

"Kid," he said, "piracy on the low seas isn't part of the curriculum at Mayfield, is it?"

"I can swim a couple of miles any day of the week."

"Can you climb eighteen feet of anchor chain at the end of it?" objected the Saint. "Can you back yourself to put a man to sleep before he can loose a yell? Can you make yourself unpleasant with a belaying pin if it comes to a riot? I hate to have to damp your ardour, Pat, but a woman can't be expected to play that game."

She was up in arms at once.

"Saint, you're trying to elbow me out again!" she accused. "Possibly you've never met anybody like me before—I flatter myself I'm a bit out of the ruck in some ways. And I won't be packed up in cotton wool! Whatever you go into, I'm going with you."

Then he let her have it from the shoulder.

"Finally," he said in a level voice, "how d'you fancy yourself as a prisoner on that tub, at the mercy of a bunch like the Tiger's, if we happen to lose? We might, you know. Think it over."

"You needn't worry," she said. "I shall carry a gun—and save one cartridge."

The Saint's fists clenched. His mouth had set in a

hard line, and his eyes were blazing. The Saintly pose had dropped from him like the flimsy mask it was, and for the first and last-but-one time she saw Simon Templar in a savage fury.

"And—you think—you, my girl, you——" The words dropped from his tense lips like chips of white-hot steel. "You think I shall let you—take—that chance?"

"Is there any logical reason, my man, why you shouldn't?"

"Yes, there is!" he stormed. "And if you aren't damned careful you'll hear it—and I don't care how you take it!"

She tossed her head.

"Well, what is it?"

"This," said Simon deliberately—"I love you."

"But, you dear priceless idiot," said Patricia, "hasn't it occurred to you that the only reason I'm in this at all is because I love you?"

For a space he stared. Then—

"Burn it," said the Saint shakily, "why couldn't you say so before?"

But after that there was only one thing to do. For a man so unversed in the ways of women he did it exceedingly well.

Chapter X

THE OLD HOUSE

IT WAS Orace, that stern disciplinarian, who ruthlessly interrupted the séance in order to lay the table for lunch. That was half an hour later, though Simon and Pat would both have sworn that the interlude had lasted no more than a short half-minute. The Saint moved away to an embrasure and gazed out at the rippling blue sea, self-conscious for the first time in his life. The girl began to tidy her hair. But Orace, after one disapproving glance round, brazenly continued with his task, as though no amount of objections to his intrusion could stop him enforcing punctuality.

"Lunch narf a minnit," warned Orace, and returned to the kitchen.

The Saint continued to admire the horizon with mixed feelings. He was sufficiently hardened in his lawless career to appreciate the practical disadvantages of Romance with a big R horning in at that stage of the proceedings. Why in the name of Noah couldn't the love and kisses have waited their turn and popped up at the conventional time, when the ungodly had been duly routed and the scene was all set for a fade-out on the inevitable embrace? But they hadn't, and there it was. The Saint was ready to sing and curse simultaneously. That the too marvellous Patricia should be in love with him was all but too good to be

true—but the fact that she was, and that he knew it, quadrupled his responsibility and his anxieties.

It was not until Orace had served lunch and departed again that they could speak naturally, and by then a difficult obstacle of shyness had grown up between them to impose a fresh restraint.

"So you see," remarked Patricia at last, "you can't leave me out of it now."

"If you cared anything about my feelings," returned the Saint, somewhat brusquely, "you'd respect them—and give way."

She shook her head.

"In anything else in the world," she said, "but not in this."

So that was that. Simon had used up all his arguments, and further effort to combat her resolution would only be tedious. She won. Short of an appeal to brute strength, he hadn't a thing left to do except grin and bear it and do his best to make the going as safe as ingenuity could. And like many strong men the Saint shrank from applying cave-man measures.

At that moment he would even have considered throwing up the sponge, tipping the wink to Carn, and sliding out of the picture. What stopped him from taking that desperate way out was a shrewd understanding of the girl's character. Somehow, out of a normal education and a simple life in a forgotten country village, she had acquired the standards of a qualified adventuress—in the clean sense. And she had a ramrod will to back her up. She felt that it was only the game to stand by her man in any and every kind of trouble, and she meant to play the game according to her lights. She would only despise him if he refused

to carry on on her account: she was determined to prove to him by deeds as well as words that she wasn't a clinging vine who was going to cramp his style either before or after the wedding bells. And it was quite hopeless for the Saint to try and point out to her that she would only hamper him—as hopeless as it would have been ungracious, bearing in mind the uniqueness of a girl of her calibre.

But for one thing Simon could and did thank his stars: he had successfully put her off the track of the first string on his bow—the disused inn behind the village. He would be able to tackle the proposition from that angle without her knowledge before nightfall, and if the Fates played into his hands he might manage to get a stranglehold on the Tiger before it was her turn to bat.

"If the mountain won't budge, Mahomet'll have to leave it where it is," said the Saint disarmingly. "But there are one or two knots that ought to be untied in the course of the afternoon, and that's where you can help. One—it might be a sound plot to see if we can't get this Aunt Aggie palaver cleared up a bit."

"She wouldn't tell me anything last night."

"You were hardly on form then, with me loose in the menagerie. This afternoon you can go back full of beans, with a parting hug from me to pep you up, and lam into Auntie two-fisted. If you can only carry it, you've got her cold. After all, she admits having tapped your treasure chest to save herself. It isn't too stiff a return to ask her to get a bit off her own chest for your satisfaction. I know she's a hefty handful, but she isn't half the size of some of the things you'll have to wire into during the next twenty-four hours, and it'll limber

you up. If she tries to bully you, remember that there isn't a bully swaggering the earth that can't be bullied himself by someone with the guts to take on the job. And if she finds she can't treat you high-handed, and bursts into tears—don't let 'em dissolve you. I can't take her on myself, so I've got to rely on you."

She nodded.

"If you say so, Saint, I shan't funk it."

"Good Scout!" he approved. "The other item is old Lapping. He's been lying doggo since the beginning of the piece, but there are so darn few possible winning numbers in this lottery that I think we ought to get a line on Lapping. On the face of it, he's right out of the running—but then, so's everyone else in Baycombe. And I'm just wondering about a lad called Harry the Duke."

" 'Harry the Duke'?" she repeated, mystified. "Whoever's he?"

"A swell mobsman that Lapping sent down for seven years when he was a judge. It was a nasty piece of work —I'll spare you the details—but Harry escaped six years ago, and he never was a forgiving man, from all accounts. In fact, knowing what's said about Harry at the Yard, I'm surprised he hasn't taken it out of Lapping before now. There's a story that Harry followed the first magistrate who convicted him halfway round the world—and got him. Since when there was no other, Harry being miles and miles above the common run of crooks in brains, until Lapping. It's a long shot, I know, but bad men run pretty much to pattern, and the Tiger's acknowledged to be an Englishman. And the hunch got me recently—suppose Harry the Duke is the Tiger?"

"Wouldn't he have been recognized?"

"Harry's face is pure plasticene, and he's forgotten more about make-up than most actors ever learn. And Harry's one of the few men I'd credit with brains enough to wear the Tiger's hat. . . . It's all speculation, and long odds against it on probability, but it's worth a flutter. You see, if the Tiger did happen to be Harry the Duke—and the Tiger started operations not so long after Harry broke jail—it accounts for Lapping's continued health. The Tiger'll just be waiting till he's ready to skedaddle with the swag, since Lapping's right where he can lay his hands on him any time, and then he'll pay off the old score and sail away."

She was still puzzled.

"But what do you want me to do?" she asked.

"If you've got time and energy left after pasting Auntie, go over and be sweet and winsome to Sir Mike," replied Simon. "You know him quite well—lay it on with a spade. Ask him to advise you about me. That's sound! If he happened to be in with the Tiger, it might put you on safer ground if you can kid them you're not in my confidence after all. If he's harmless, it can't hurt us. Talk to him as the old friend and honorary uncle. Tell him about *l'affaire* Bittle—noting how he reacts—and lead from that to my eccentric self. You might say that you felt attracted, and wondered if it was wise to let it go any further. The blushing, ingenuous maiden act."

"I'll do it," she said, and he leaned across the table and touched her hand.

"You're a partner in a million, old Pat."

After lunch Orace served coffee outside, and they

sat and smoked while they discussed the final arrangements.

"I'll send Orace over to fetch you after dinner," he said. "I think it'd be better if I didn't appear. Put a bathing costume on under your frock; and when the time comes I'll give you a belt and the neatest waterproof holster, that'll just carry your fit in guns. But I'll give you the shooter now."

He took a little automatic from his pocket, slipped the jacket to bring a cartridge into the chamber, and clicked over the safety catch.

"And it's not for ornament," he added. "If the occasion calls for it, let fly, and apologize to the body. Have you ever handled this sort of gadget?"

"Often. I used to go and shoot in revolver ranges on piers."

"Then that's all to the good. Put it away in your pocket—but don't flourish it about unnecessarily, because it belongs to Bloem. I picked his pocket when I was showing him out last night, thinking it might be handy to have around the house."

She rose.

"I'd better be getting along," she said. "I shall have a lot to do this afternoon. And we assemble after dinner?"

"Eightish," he said. "Don't take any risks till then. I just hate having to let you out of my sight even for as long as that. You never know what Tigers are up to. All the help I can give you is, distrust everybody and everything, keep your head and use it, and don't go and walk into the first trap that's set for you like any fool heroine in a novel."

Her arms went round his neck, and he held her close

to him for a while. And then she drew back her head and looked up at him with a smile, though her eyes were brimming.

"Oh, I'm silly," she said. "But love's like that, old boy. What about me letting you out of my sight for so long?"

"I'm safer than the Bank of England," he reassured her. "The gypsy told me I'd die in my bed at the ripe old age of ninety-nine. And d'you think I'm going to let the Tiger or anyone else book me to Kingdom Come when I've got you waiting for me here? I am not!"

And then there had to be a further delay, which need not be reported. For those who have lost their hearts know all about these things, and those who haven't don't deserve to be told. . . .

But at last he had to let her go, so he kissed her again and then took her hand and kissed that. And afterward he took her shoulders and squared them up, and drew himself up in front of her.

"Soldiers' wives, Pat!" he commanded. "Cheerio—and the best of luck!"

"Cheerio, Saint!" she answered. "God bless you. . . ."

She flung him a brave smile, and turned and walked off down the hill with Orace ambling behind like a faithful dog. Just before the path led her round a bend and out of sight she stopped and waved her handkerchief, and the Saint waved back. Then she was gone, and he wondered if he would ever see her again.

He went back into the Pill Box, took off his coat, rolled up his left sleeve, and strapped Anna securely to his forearm. That was for emergencies; but now that the Tiger knew all about Anna the Saint had to

rummage in his bag for her twin sister, and this dangerous woman he fixed to his left calf in a similar manner, where it would be quite likely to be overlooked if he were caught and searched. He made sure that he had his first-aid cigarette case in his hip pocket, and as an afterthought added to the kit a telescopic rod of the finest steel with a claw at one end.

As a final precaution, he sat down and scribbled a note:

If I don't turn up by seven-thirty look for me at the Old House—the place behind the village that used to be an inn. Failing that, try Bloem's or Bittle's. Don't go to Carn till you've drawn blank at all those three places. And BE CAREFUL. If they get me they'll be on the lookout for you.

This he folded, addressed to Orace, and left in a conspicuous position in the kitchen, where his man would be sure to find it when he returned.

Then the Saint went swinging down the track toward the village.

It was a ticklish job he was embarking on. In broad daylight stealth was out of the question. It would mean walking boldly up to the enemy fortress and trying to get as far as he wanted in one dash, before the opposition could collect their wits. And then there would be ructions—but that would have to take care of itself.

The Saint did not remember the Old House very distinctly, and he paused at the edge of a spinney lower down the hill to survey the land. And then he gave thanks once again for the continuance of his phenomenal luck. There it was—the blessing out of the blue that

he'd never dared to hope or pray for—a long low wall that sprang from one corner of the Old House and ran north toward the straggly outskirts of the village, losing itself behind a couple of sheds belonging to a small farm. Hardly believing his good fortune, the Saint hurried down the slope and passed through the village. He worked round the farm outbuildings, and found that he was not deceived. The wall started there, and it was just high enough to screen his advance if he bent almost double.

That was not a very difficult feat, and Simon plunged straight on into his adventure. Stooping down, he trotted rapidly along under cover of the wall till he had nearly reached the nearest corner of the Old House. At that point he slowed up and proceeded with more caution, travelling on his toes and fingertips, in case there should be a watcher posted at an upper window. When he actually came to the Old House itself he flattened down on his stomach and lay prone for a moment while he planned his entrance.

He could see one wall of the Old House—a dead flat façade of chipped and mouldering brick, broken only by four symmetrically placed windows and a door. The door was a godsend. The windows themselves were roughly boarded up, and to prize off those boards, though it could be done in a brace of shakes, would be rather too audible for the Saint's taste; whereas a mere door could probably be dealt with, by an expert, almost noiselessly.

The Saint wormed his way forward, fitting himself as snugly as he could into the angle between the wall and the ground and taking infinite pains to make no sound that might betray his approach to a keen ear

within. From the moment he left the shelter of the wall, however, he was in danger of discovery, for if any sentinel had elected to peer out of a window the Saint would be lucky to be overlooked. The watcher would probably scrutinize the nearest cover, in which case his gaze would pass right above the Saint; but on the other hand the enemy might be well aware of the possibilities of that too convenient wall, and in that case anyone who was taking a peek round would certainly cast an eye downward, and then the Saint wouldn't have an earthly chance. That salutary realization made him wriggle along as fast as he could with safety, and it must be admitted that his spine was tingling and the short hairs on the scruff of his neck bristling throughout that dozen yards' crawl. It is not pleasant to have visions of a man sticking a gun out of an upper window and plugging a chunk of lead down into your back.

But his head came on a level with the door at last, and nothing so disastrous had happened. The Saint crept up into a squatting position and, tentatively, began to breathe again, while he inspected the door at close quarters.

He found that the handle had snapped off short—in fact, he discovered the tarnished brass ball lying under a bush a few yards away. The lock was rusty, and the door sagged on its hinges. The Saint scratched his head. Either the Old House was not the goods at all, or the Tiger Cubs were banking a lot on its reputation of being haunted. He looked again and more closely at the broken end of the handle lever protruding from the door, and caught his breath. The jagged metal was shining—not a trace of the rust that flaked over the rest of the metal dulled its brilliance. That was a new

break! Even in forty-eight hours the exposed steel would have lost some of that sheen. Therefore, someone had been there recently. And unless the village children were less superstitious than their elders, that meant that the Tiger Cubs had graced the premises.

Simon put his hand on the door and pushed gently. It gave back smoothly at his touch.

The Saint took his hand away as if the wood had burned it. The door yielded smoothly! It wasn't locked, or bolted, or barred, and there wasn't a creak anywhere. And the doors of houses that haven't been inhabited since the year Dot don't do things like that—for one thing, the hinges are so rusted up that it takes a thundering good push to shift them; but these hinges turned like brand-new ones freshly oiled. That meant that someone certainly was using the Old House. And, plus the fact that there was apparently nothing to stop anyone else using it as well, the complete scenery had a howling warning scrawled all over it. A tight little smile moved the Saint's mouth.

" 'Will you walk into my parlour?' said the spider to the fly," murmured the Saint. "Surest thing you know, son—but not exactly like that sort of boob."

He drew back to think it over, and cast a thoughtful glance at the boarded windows. But the same difficulty presented itself: to break away a plank makes a noise at the best of times, and he could now see that the planks in question were not simply nailed to the frame but solidly riveted in place. That seemed to rule out the windows, which left only the door—with someone waiting for him inside, as like as not. Well, Simon decided, that had got to be faced, and it was better

to tackle something you had a line on than something you hadn't. It wasn't a time for humming and hawing and eventually leaving your card and promising to look them up next walk you took that way. He was more than ever determined to get inside the Old House that afternoon, and the door was the only way in that presented itself. Therefore, it must be the door.

The Saint pushed the door a little farther. Nothing happened. Then he slowly edged one eye round at a point where no one within would expect a man to appear—only a few inches off the ground. But inside was darkness, and he could distinguish nothing. The Saint swung the door again, until it was over a foot ajar.

Plop!

Just the noise that a big stone makes falling into a well; and something nicked the door, breaking a burst of splinters out of the rotten wood. The Saint looked up at the wound, and saw that it would have been on a level with his chest if he had been standing up.

That was enough—ultimatum, declaration of war, and attack, all together. And it meant also that, whatever was waiting for him inside, it would probably be healthier to charge right in and take it on than to stick around in the open where half-a-dozen Tiger Cubs could take pot shots at him from the windows. The Saint gathered himself for the rush and slid Anna out of her sheath. He tested his muscles, drew a deep breath, and jumped.

One leap took him well inside the door, and in a flash he had banged it shut again behind him. That evened things up a bit, for it stopped him being a

target against the light outside for any sniper hidden in the darkness. Then, almost in the same movement, he had flung back again against the door, in a corner.

He had half expected to find someone waiting just behind the door to put him down as he passed, but his groping fingers touched nothing but dust. First mistake. Well, that meant that anything that was coming to him would arrive out of the blackness in front.

The Saint stood motionless, listening intently, and straining his eyes to try and locate the gentleman who had fired that single shot—and had been too surprised at the suddenness of the Saint's reaction to loose off another round at the critical instant when the Saint was silhouetted in the doorway on his way in. It was at least a comfort to have your back to a wall, and to know that the other man was literally as much in the dark as you were; but there were such things as electric torches, and the Saint was tensely prepared for a beam of light to shoot from the obscurity and pick him out for the benefit of the man with the gun. Simon had Anna held in his deft fingers ready to send her whistling through the hand of any man who turned a spotlight on him, and equally ready to hamstring anyone who might creep up and jump on him.

Minutes passed without the other side making a move, and Simon shifted one hand to scratch his head mechanically. Not even his preternaturally acute hearing could catch the least sound—and in that silence he would have bet half his worldly goods on being able to detect the faint rustle of cloth if a man so much as lifted his arm. He made out the steady beating of his own heart, and even heard the whisper of his wrist watch ticking, but there was nothing else.

His eyes were gradually becoming accustomed to the gloom, and at last he began to scowl very thoughtfully, for the passage in front of him was empty. One by one the details became visible. First, two doors, opposite each other and about two yards away, both of them closed. He looked down. The dust lay thick on the floor of the passage, and there were marks of many feet, both entering and leaving. Some of the footprints branched off to the door on his right, but it seemed that nobody had used the room on the left, unless there was another entrance to it. At the far end of the passage was a small window, boarded up like the rest, and it was through this that enough light filtered in for him to be able to see.

It was not long before other features of the landscape showed up. Farther along, to the left, was another door, and the footprints proved that that room had been used fairly recently. And at the end of the passage, under the window, stood a table with a square box on it.

The Saint looked long and hard at that box, and suddenly he had an inspiration. Bending down, he felt along the ground by the door. Presently he found wires, and a little research disclosed the fact that they ran up the corridor—toward the table and the square box. A little more investigation brought him to the metal contacts which closed the electric current. One of them he found screwed to the inside of the door, low down; the other projected from a terminal fixed to the floor. On the strength of that, Simon began to tiptoe down the passage, though he did not relax his vigilance for an instant. He came to the table and the box, and examined them with interest. The wires he had found

led to terminals on the box, and from the front of it protruded a shining steel tube.

"Very ingenious, my Tiger," was the Saint's unspoken comment. "When I open the door, I get pipped. And I didn't, after all. *So* sorry!"

However, just in case the arrangement had any more shots left, and in case he should have to leave hurriedly by the door, he slewed the box round so that the gun barrel pointed into the wall, and disconnected the wires. Then he took stock of the position again.

The discovery and circumnavigation of that little booby trap didn't dispose of the possibility of encountering others—in fact, his estimate of the Tiger forced him to realize that the next step he took might set some other equally neat little contrivance working. And if not that, there might still be Tiger Cubs in the building, already warned of his arrival by Booby Trap Number One going off, and knowing that it hadn't functioned quite according to plan. The amusing thought that they might be in some fear of his fighting record struck the Saint, and he chuckled quietly. Perhaps they felt confident of having him safely trapped, and were just biding their time to strike him down when the operation could be performed without risk to themselves. Well, it wouldn't hurt them to keep on hoping.

But the job looked just as prickly now that he was inside the Old House as it had been when he was outside. However gingerly he opened the next door, there might be men inside the room waiting to open fire as soon as he showed up in the doorway. Yet the Saint was no piker; and, having got so far, he intended to go the rest of the journey. And the only course he could see was to repeat the tactics he had used when enter-

ing the building in the first place. So, without further hesitation, he got on with it.

There was the door with footprints leading to and from it, and that seemed the most promising. There were also footprints outside the swing door nearest to him, but they were less encouraging, for at that point there was only a double set, whereas the other seemed to have been fairly popular. And the Saint's philosophy laid down the law that if you must stroll into the home-sweet-home of a bunch of cut-throats you might as well do the thing in style. Wherefore the Saint went down the passage and halted by the most dangerous looking door.

There was a handle on that door. He turned it and opened the door a couple of inches. Then, keeping well away, he set his toe against the wood, braced himself, and kicked. The door opened wide, but there was no muffled report. That short history at least wasn't going to repeat itself. And, accordingly, the only thing to do was to march straight in.

Simon went—in a catlike spring that carried him round the corner and set his back against the wall again in a flash. But once more there was no response. Simon had jerked the door shut behind him as before, and one foot was against it so that nobody could open it and sneak out without his knowing it. But only stillness answered his listening, and the room was so dark that he could see nothing. He cursed himself for not having an electric torch. But it was far too late to remedy that, and therefore his only hope was to strike a match—and hope that his concerted speed of eye and brain and hand would be great enough to overcome the handicap he would have to create for himself. If there was

anyone in the room, he would be able to see the Saint before the Saint saw him. But the Saint had taken longer chances than that, and his nerves were getting just a shade raw. Simon Templar was afraid of nothing that he could see and hit back at, but this creeping around, seeing no sign of the enemy and yet continually threatened by him, was turning into a joke that the Saint didn't feel inclined to laugh at.

Still gripping Anna, he fished a box of matches out of his pocket and struck one quickly, holding it behind his head so that the flare of it would not dazzle him.

And the room was perfectly empty.

The match burned down between his fingers and went out. He struck another, but even that could not cause a human being to materialize. Yet there had been men there—their footprints were all over the floor, and there were three comparatively new-looking beer bottles in one corner, and scraps of greasy paper were littered about.

"This is getting annoying," said the Saint.

He struck a third match, and took a couple of steps into the room.

Then he tried to hurl himself back, but he was a fraction of a second late. The ground dropped away beneath his feet and he felt himself falling down and down into utter darkness.

Chapter XI

CARN LISTENS IN

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR CARN of Scotland Yard, temporary medico, was not far from being typical of the modern C. I. D. man—the difference, in fact, being little more than an extra gramme or two of brain which lifted him a finger's breadth above the common competent herd and which had led to his being detailed for the special work of tracking the Tiger.

In other words, Carn was not obtrusively brilliant. He knew his job from A to Z, plus one or two other letters. He was a plodder, but an efficient plodder, having been taught in a school which prefers perseverance to genius and which trains men to rely on methodical painstaking investigation rather than on flashes of inspiration. Carn would never send an adoring gallery into rhapsodies with some dazzling feat of Holmesian deduction; he never whirled through a case in a kind of triumphant procession, with bouquets and confetti flying through the air, streamers blazing, and a brass band urging the awestricken populace to see the conquering hero come—but his superiors (a hard-headed and unromantic crowd) knew that he had a record of generally getting there, even if his progress and arrival were monotonous and unspectacular.

This brief biographical note is made for the dis-

illusionment of anyone who has imagined that Carn was a genial cipher in the affair of the Tiger. He was not. But his tactics were different from those of the Saint, who had a weakness for the limelight and no reason to deny himself the gratification of his vanity. The Saint was one man, nearly as far outside the law as the Tiger, and therefore the Tiger would not hesitate to accept the challenge. But Carn represented Authority, a vast and inexorable machinery backed up by arms and men, and if Carn showed up in his true colours they were the colours of Authority—and before that the Tiger would hesitate for a long time. Carn had no chance of accomplishing his mission unless he worked underground and in the dark, and that, in a way, was a handicap, though it suited his temperament. But Carn, the stolid man hunter, took one look at the handicap, shrugged, and went on with the job—in his own laborious fashion.

The arrival of Mr. Templar, heralded by the Saint himself with the moral equivalent of a fanfare of terrific trumpets, illuminated with Kleig arcs, and fully equipped with one-man orchestra, noises off, self-starter, alarms, excursions, and all modern conveniences, lacking nothing but the camera men and press agent, had eclipsed Carn's modest efficiency, and perhaps had even put him off his plodding stroke for a while. But it would have taken more than a legion of Saints to derange our Mr. Carn permanently.

Carn was slow and Simon was sensational; but in the end they cancelled out, for Carn had had a start of several months. He knew from certain happenings one evening that Templar was hot on the Tiger's heels; he was not unduly perturbed, for he could have said

the same for himself. In his quiet way, he had already given some attention to Sir John Bittle, and he knew quite a lot about that unpopular man and his strongly fortified house with its garrison of toughs. He had also put some work into Bloem, among others; but Bloem was the more slippery customer, and Carn had made very little headway, so that the Boer's sudden prominence in the field came as a surprise. Carn, recuperating from the shock with his well-tried resilience, had nevertheless not yet had time to follow up the clue which the Saint had provided. Carn had also an eye to the possibilities of Agatha Girton; he knew of her strange and secretive association with Bittle, but so far he had been unable to account for it better than by assuming her to be in with the gang—though in what capacity, and with what rank, he hadn't an inkling. There was Algy, for another; and Inspector Carn was prepared to believe startling things of Algy. The other three—Shaw, Smith, and Lapping—Carn had decided to rule out. Lapping in particular, with the policeman's ingrained reverence for the Law and its higher officers, he barred completely. In fact, except the Saint, Sir Michael Lapping was the only man in Baycombe who knew Carn's true designation and sole interest in life—Lapping was a Justice of the Peace, and Carn, hopeful of success, realized that the ex-judge was an indispensable ally, for Carn carried a warrant ready for Lapping's signature as soon as the name of the Tiger could be filled in with reasonable certainty. Taking things all round, therefore, Carn reckoned that he was as well posted as the Saint—and in this he was very nearly right. It was Carn's misfortune that he had never been privileged to make the acquaintance of

Fernando, and that because of this loss he had been unaware of the significance of the Old House.

Carn had a hobby which he had only adopted since his arrival in Baycombe. He was as enthusiastic about it as he was about butterflies and beetles, but he reserved his pleasure for the hours when he was alone. The nearest telephone was at Ilfracombe, and by Carn's orders all letters addressed to Baycombe were opened at the post office there, copied, tested for invisible ink, and forwarded to their destinations after he had been informed of the results of this prying. It was because of divers hints which he had picked up by this means that Carn became so passionately devoted to wireless.

It was on the day following the apotheosis of Bloem, when the remains of his lunch had been cleared away, that Carn's hobby justified its adoption.

As soon as he found himself alone, the detective went over and unlocked his small roll-top writing desk. When this was opened, it revealed an ebonite panel arrayed with the complicated system of knobs, coils, and valves which have now ceased to be regarded as mysteries sealed from all but the scientist. The aërial Carn had fixed for himself among the rafters in the roof; and all the essential wiring was cunningly concealed. There was need of this secrecy, for Carn, who had never served an apprenticeship to a cook while walking his beat, was forced to employ a woman from the village to look after his digestion. Village women talk—and the nearest whisper that there was another radio fan in Baycombe, coming to the ears of the Tiger, would have deprived Carn of one of his most promising lines of investigation.

The detective put on the headphones, plugged in,

and began his systematic combing of the ether. It was not easy for Carn to use his weapon even when he was convinced of its utility. He never knew at what time the Tiger might have arranged to communicate with his agent; though he did know the discouraging fact that the Tiger always called on a different wavelength. Twice Carn had struck the tail-end of a conversation, and had noted the dialling of his instrument, but the most patient listening had failed to pick up a second message; then, feeling round again, Carn had caught the same signal in a totally different range. Probably the wavelength changed according to a prearranged time-table.

This, however, was Carn's lucky day. The Tiger was using a very long wave, and Carn had reversed his usual routine and started at the top to work down the scale. He had not been probing the atmosphere for five minutes before he tuned in on a peculiar high-pitched tremulous whine which he recognized immediately for the note sent out by the Tiger's apparatus in the gaps when no speech was coming over. And he had hardly brought the last condenser round to the exact reaction, so that the familiar note was singing in his ears at full strength, when a voice cut clean across the humming.

"Don't start to come in before it's quite dark."

Carn stiffened. He had some idea of what was referred to.

The voice continued: "Be very careful. See that there isn't a light showing anywhere, and slow up to half speed when you're two miles out. Change over to the electric motors at that point—Templar stays awake at night, and his hearing's exceptionally good."

Then another voice asked, "Can you arrange to guide us in?"

"I'll post a man on the Old House, seaward side, with a green lantern."

"Is there likely to be trouble?"

"I can't say yet. I'm hoping to get rid of Templar this evening, but he was born lucky, and he might manage to escape again. Be on the safe side. I've just heard that the Holm girl and he have fixed it up—it's just possible that that might make him back out, squeak to the dicks, and leave the rest to them. I think it's too late for that to matter, but you'd better be prepared for anything."

"I shall."

"Good. Did you get the full crew?"

"Two oilers didn't turn up. I heard just before midnight they were stewed to the gills downtown. I took a chance and left 'em. You said I was to sail punctually."

"Quite right—but that leaves you with only eleven, counting yourself, doesn't it?"

"That's so, Chief. But we can manage easy."

"You'll have to. . . . Now listen. I want you to send the first boat round to the quay. You'll miss the fishermen—they'll have gone out on the tide, at ten. Bittle and Bloem will be with me, and Templar might be, too. That depends on what happens, and what I decide to do with him. His servant will go over the cliff just about the time you're picking us up. And I might have to bring the girl along as well. I'm still wondering whether Templar's put her next this joke. In any case, she's very easy on the eyes. I'll get a report shortly, and then I'll be able to think better what to do."

"This is a new one on you, Chief—dragging a skirt in. You always swore you wouldn't have it."

The voice of the Tiger snapped back incisively:

"That's my business, Maggs! When I want your opinions I'll ask for them. All you've got to do is have the cabins ready and send that boat to the quay. Get off all the other boats you can man to the Old House. You can get three away, and still keep a guard. And keep the engineer below—if we do get raided, the boat crews must shift for themselves. Your men haven't got to do anything but row—and if any man catches a crab or talks in the boat I'll flay him alive. Tell 'em that from me. I'll have men on the island to help 'em load, and there's a small derrick there, the one we used for hauling the stuff up first, just waiting to be rigged. You ought to be able to get away by four, if you work."

"Stand on me, Chief."

"See that I don't have to tread on you. Have you got that all in your head?"

"Down to the Amen, Chief."

"Call me at seven, in case there are any alterations to be made in those orders. Good-bye."

The Tiger's transmission shut down with an audible click, and Carn removed the headphones and leaned back in his chair, gazing thoughtfully at the instrument which had enabled him to listen in on that enlightening chat.

Enlightening it certainly was, and no error. Almost the only thing it neglected to reveal to the detective was the identity of the Tiger himself—the voice of the man called "Chief" had been studiously throttled down to a toneless flat key that was useless as a clue. The Tiger

was taking no chances of being caught in person, and he had spoken throughout in a dead level monotone that anyone could have imitated—and, in addition, Carn knew the tricks which electricity plays even with a man's natural voice, and he would have looked long and carefully before leaping to accuse anybody of being the Tiger on no other grounds than a fancied vocal resemblance after the valves and magnets and transformers had finished distorting a disguised intonation.

The one thing that puzzled Carn was the reference to the Old House, which apparently was an island. He got up and went over to where, on the wall, was pinned a large-scale ordnance map of the district. It was covered with patterns in various coloured inks, for ostensibly it was a record of Dr. Carn's geological investigations; but in reality it was a diagram of the battlefield for the assistance of Inspector Carn's criminal investigation. A search of the coast line located the Old House, which Carn had noticed on his bug-hunting expeditions without imagining that such a small hunk of land was dignified with a name all to itself, for he had been born and bred a long way from the sea.

That, then, was the Old House, from which something was to be taken on board at dead of night. Carn did not have to wonder what that something might be.

Everything had come into his hands in a few short minutes. The detective pulled up a chair and began to pack his pipe, and for all his practical cold-bloodedness he found that his fingers moved clumsily for the trembling of his hand. His agitation was pardonable, since the trailing of the Tiger was the biggest and stiffest undertaking he had yet brought to a triumphant conclusion. And regard it as a triumphant conclusion he

did already, for with dexterous handling he could not conceive the triumph slipping through his fingers. All he had to do was make his plans for the coup. He knew now where the gold was, and it was as safe there as if it had been lying in the vaults of the Confederate Bank. Even if the Saint also knew its whereabouts, Carn could not imagine even that supremely resourceful man being able to remove it singlehanded by morning—especially with several Tiger Cubs on the spot. And the Tiger had kindly informed Inspector Carn exactly where he could be found that night. There would be a number of men down at the quay, and the Tiger would be one of them. Ruling out Bloem, Bittle, and the Saint, it did not seem as if anyone could go far wrong in making a selection.

And possibly the Saint was to be discreetly removed. Carn had to think of that, and it annoyed him. His first duty was to warn Templar and make some arrangements for having him looked after—that was indisputable. The Saint was no ally of his, but neither was he an enemy, nor (so far) a criminal, and as a human life he had to be considered. But the time was so short.

As has been explained, Baycombe was as effectively shut off from the rest of England as if it had been lifted out of Devonshire and planted on the other side of the Channel—worse even than that, for there was neither telephone nor telegraph office in the village. To get hold of the men he required for that night's work, Carn would have to go into Ilfracombe; and the dilapidated Ford of prehistoric vintage, which the local publican hired out to villagers whose business took them into the town, would take an unconscionable

time over the journey—and would probably get up on its back axle and shriek boastfully if it went all the way without breaking down. Bittle had a Rolls, which the Saint might have had the immortal rind to borrow (with or without permission) in similar circumstances, but which Carn had to consider enviously and leave it at that. The only other car in the neighbourhood was Mr. Lomas-Coper's Morris. Carn reviewed that possibility and reluctantly ruled it out, for what Algy knew Bloem might be expected to find out.

And, once in Ilfracombe, men would have to be raised and brought to Baycombe. Even after nightfall, the number of officers Carn could assemble for the raid was strictly limited, for the Tiger must not be alarmed at all costs, and that was a difficult thing to insure with the doubtful Agatha Girton all but on the detective's doorstep. In London, Miss Girton could have been temporarily removed, since London is a large place and its policemen hold their tongues, but Carn had no faith in the reticence of Mr. Hopkins. Then, since Carn would have to stake his success on the skill of a mere handful of men, he wanted if possible to 'phone London and get those men specially sent down from the Yard by racing car—he had the Yard man's congenital contempt for the provincial constabulary. That would be running it very fine, but he figured that it could just be wangled if he got a clear line and found the Assistant Commissioner quickly, and if the said Commissioner impressed it on the special squad that they would have to touch the ground in spots if they were going to be in at the kill, and if nothing went wrong with the police car. There were plenty of odds against him, but he reckoned that the importance of the occasion justi-

fied going to extremes—and, if the worst came to the very worst, he could still call in the country bumpkins and swear in the Saint and Orace, as he had the right to do, though it would gall his soul to have to make his arrest with their assistance.

Anyhow, whichever way the calculation was made, it was going to be a breathless neck-and-neck affair, with every minute rated at inestimable value. And, having got every item in the programme weighed up and docketed in his brain, Carn wasted no time wailing and gnashing his teeth against the cussedness of a Fate that had tossed him such a fine, big, juicy plum that day, for all the accompanying hail of thistles and cactus. Once he knew where all the thorns were, and had tested their precise degree of spikiness, he grabbed up his hat and stick and set out to blunt as many of them as possible.

He went down to the village as quickly as he could without seeming unduly flurried to any of the Tiger's Cubs who might catch a glimpse of him, and on the way through he stopped at the inn.

"I've just had a letter from an old patient of mine," he explained. "An Ilfracombe man—he's had a heart attack. I've been his doctor for years, and he wants me to attend to him now. It's a beastly nuisance, but I feel bound to go. Can you let me have the car?"

It was a plausible lie, for a boy cycled over from Ilfracombe with the post every morning, and did not arrive until lunch time.

"I'm sorry, sir," replied the publican, and Carn's heart did a back-somersault and flopped sickeningly against his diaphragm—"two of the men from Sir John's came down and hired the car early this morning to go into Ilfracombe for their day off."

"Damn the gentlemen," said Carn, but he said it to himself, and he did not call them gentlemen.

Aloud he said, with only a moderate display of annoyance:

"I ought to try and get over somehow—my patient's in a bad way, and they're expecting me. I suppose these fellows won't be back till late?"

"They didn't say, sir, but I'm not expecting them till the evening."

"Hasn't Horrick got a trap?"

Horrick was the nearest farmer, about half a mile out of the village, and the innkeeper opined that Horrick had something of the sort.

"I wonder if you could send a boy over to find out if he'd lend it to me?" suggested Carn.

The innkeeper cogitated at length, in the leisured manner of country people, while Carn masked his impatience as best he could. At last the man decided that it would be possible.

"Perhaps you'll join me in a glass of beer, sir?" he invited, after making this momentous resolution.

"If I could see the boy now, he could be getting on his way while we down a quick one," Carn mooted gently.

The publican sighed. The fidgetiness of city-bred people offended his placid spirit. Nevertheless, he shouted "Boy!" and after a decent interval, during which he embarked on a voluminous discussion of the weather and its influence on fish, a diminutive urchin answered his summons.

The urchin was instructed in the vernacular, but Carn was moved to add an exhortation in another language.

"Tell him it's urgent," he said, slipping a half-crown

into the infant's paw, "and hurry yourself. You can ride over in the trap, and I'll stand you another of these if you're back quickly."

The boy nodded and disappeared at the double.

The innkeeper was working the beer engine, and Carn, outwardly impassive, gnawed mouthfuls out of the stem of his pipe in the effort of appearing calm. The absence of the Ford, however antique and rickety, was a disaster. It meant that unless he was remarkably lucky he would have to be content with the assistance of a mob of mutton-headed locals for the big job. They would be panting with excitement at the magnitude of it, twice as jumpy as so many cats on hot bricks, and good-naturedly clod-hopperly dense. The prospect of seeing the Tiger get away through their bungling almost broke Carn's heart. He would have taken a chance and tackled the whole brigade of Tiger Cubs single-handed if he had seen the faintest hope of success, but he had been turned out of a different mould from Simon Templar's, and his kind of brain did not run to schemes for capturing a boatload of bandits all by himself. As it was, he had more than half a mind to enlist the Saint. Templar was straight, he knew. And it would be better to pinch the Tiger with the Saint's help than to see the Tiger get clean away.

That, however, would have to be resolved on the spur of the moment, for there was still a chance—the rapidly fading ghost of a chance, but a chance all the same—that that final humiliation would not be thrust upon him.

Carn gulped down his beer, thankful that the innkeeper was perfectly happy to conduct a monologue.

"Have another?"

"I don't mind if I do, thank you, sir."

The detective cursed and fumed inwardly, but it had to be borne. If he had rushed out without standing his whack, every subsequent customer would hear the innkeeper's comments on the doctor's extraordinary behaviour. And that would get to the Tiger's ears, and the Tiger, as Simon Templar had observed, owned a nasty, suspicious mind.

But the ordeal ended at last, and Carn was able to excuse himself. He went through the village and set out up the hill to the Pill Box. It was a sultry day, and Carn had accumulated a lot of spare avoirdupois since his London-to-Southend days. He climbed doggedly, with the perspiration streaming down into his collar, and gasped his relief when the slope commenced to flatten out.

He was still a dozen yards from the Pill Box when Orace appeared at the door. Orace made it elaborately obvious that he had simply come out for a breather. He surveyed the scenery with the concentrated interest of an artist, and honoured the detective with nothing but a nonchalant glance, but he kept his right hand behind his back.

"Mr. Templar in?" demanded Carn from a distance.

"Ain't," replied Orace laconically.

"D'you know where he is?"

Orace focussed the detective with unfriendly eyes.

"Dunno. Gorn fra walk, mos' likely. 'E might be chasin' 'ippopotamoscerosses acrorst Epping Forest," enlarged Orace, become humorous, "or 'e might be 'oppin' up'n dahn the 'Ome Secrety's chimbley looking fer Santiclaws. Or 'e mightn't. 'Oo knows, as the actriss said ta the bishup?"

"Now, look here, Little Tich," rasped Carn with pardonable heat, "I haven't sweated up this blasted mountain in a temperature like hell warmed up just to hear a lot of funny backchat from you. The Tiger's going to push you over the cliff to-night, but you don't matter much. It's Mr. Templar I came to warn."

Orace looked meditatively at the detective.

"Ho?" he remarked. "Ho! Well in that case——"

His right hand came out of cover, revealing the blunderbuss which Carn had seen before. It levelled on the detective's waistcoat, and Carn needed all his experienced agility to knock it up and wrench it out of Orace's hand before any damage could be done. Then he chucked it round the corner of the Pill Box.

"Don't be such a blazing lunatic!" he snapped. "As far as I can see, the only use for that lump of ivory above your ears is that it makes a place to hang your hat on. Don't you see that I'm trying to save your worthless skin? I tell you, the Tiger's laying for you both this evening. Got it? Tiger—T-I-G-E-R—Tiger! You know who he is, don't you? Well, look out, that's all. He's aiming to have the pair of you ready for the morgue by morning, and if you wake up and find yourselves dead after this nobody can blame me."

"Nobody's gonna worry 'bout you, cocky," Orace assured him. "Thankin' ya kindly fer the tip, an' will ya go back to the Tiger an' tell 'im Mr. Templar an' me are layin' fer 'im to-night, an' so if 'e wants ta pick up a packet o' trouble this is our 'ome address?"

"Well, you go off and find your boss, Orace, and pass the tip along to him," said Carn shortly, and, turning his back on the man, lumbered off down the hill again.

He found the trap waiting for him outside the inn,

with a farm hand on the box and an expectant urchin in tow. Largesse was forthcoming, and then Carn clambered up beside the driver.

"Ilfracombe," he ordered, "and make all the speed you can. I'm on an urgent case."

They rattled away, and Carn fished out his pipe and fumbled for matches. There they were, on their way, and fretting wouldn't put an inch an hour on the pace. Everything depended on the stamina of the animal between the shafts. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter past three. Still, he thought that if the horse was willing and they were afflicted with no such Act of God as a cast shoe or a wheel going adrift there might yet be a glimmer of hope, for the Tiger's ship, then riding over the rim of the horizon and with orders not to start coming in until nightfall, would take some time to reach the Old House. The loading of the gold would be an all-night job, but he knew that the Tiger intended to prefer his own safety to the safety of his ill-gotten gains, and the arrest of the Tiger was the accomplishment which Carn most desired to add to his record.

The next minute Carn remembered that he had omitted to warn Patricia Holm. He swore inaudibly at that for a while; but presently he was able to console himself with the thought that if the Tiger was rightly informed, and Simon and she had fixed it up, the Saint would not be far away. And probably the Saint had as good an idea of the girl's danger as anyone. That, at any rate, was the only optimistic way to look at it.

They were just topping the hill which in a moment would shut out the village from their sight when Carn heard the shots. There were two reports, so close together that their echoes merged into one rattle. In-

stinctively the detective made a mental note of the exact time; then he looked at the man beside him. That worthy, however, was quite unperturbed, but he read Carn's astonishment at this display of sangfroid.

"We'm used to ut, zur," he explained. "That be Maister Lomas-Coper. 'E do zometimes be out zhooting rabbuts."

"I see," said Carn, and made no further comment.

But the detective knew a lot about firearms. The distance and the echoes prevented an exact diagnosis, but as far as he could judge the gun had been fired somewhere among the houses on the west tor, and it sounded to him like much heavier artillery than is employed for shooting rabbits.

Chapter XII

TEA WITH LAPPING

AGATHA GIRTON had not appeared at breakfast that morning, and when Patricia returned home to buckle into the task that the Saint had intrusted to her the housekeeper told her that the lady had gone out for a walk directly after lunch without saying when she might be expected back. Miss Girton often went for long tramps over the surrounding country, swinging a heavy stick and stepping out with the long, tireless stride of a veteran. In the light of her recently acquired knowledge, Patricia now realized that Miss Girton had been growing more and more grim and taciturn of late, and that concurrently with the beginning of this moodiness those walks had been growing more protracted and more frequent. The girl saw in this the evidence of Agatha Girton's increasing anxiety—the woman was so masculine in all things that she might be expected, in the circumstances, to fall back on the typically masculine relief of strenuous physical effort to aid mental work and at the same time to gain some peace of mind through sheer fatigue.

But, though there was nothing astonishing or alarming in Agatha Girton's hike, it was annoying because it prevented Patricia from carrying out her first promise to the Saint. Miss Girton might well stay out until dinner

time, and then it would be too late to start any controversy, with the big appointment hanging in the background. However, that couldn't be cured, so the only thing to do was to get busy on the next specimen.

Patricia found Lapping pottering about in his garden, arrayed in stained tweeds, coatless, bare-armed, with an ancient felt hat on the back of his head. He looked a picture of healthy rustic late middle age, and the expansive good humour with which he greeted her was in keeping with his appearance.

"My dear Miss Holm! We haven't seen anything of you for far too long. How are you?"

"Splendid," she told him. "And you're looking younger than ever."

He shook his head with a whimsical smile.

"Flattery, my dear, base flattery. I'm an old man, and youth belongs to youth." He peered quizzically at her in his short-sighted fashion. "What chance have I got for your favour against that dashing young hero of the Pill Box? No, you must leave me to my years."

"But I want to talk to you, Sir Michael," she said, smiling back. "Can't I even come inside the gate?"

"Temptress!" he teased. "You're a witch—but I'm too old and dusty to be vamped even by you."

But he threw down the trowel, wiped his hands on his trousers, and opened the gate for her. It was not a strain to take the Saint's advice and treat Lapping as a sort of honorary uncle. His manner invited it. He was one of those rare and lovable neuters, of kindly wisdom and broad human sympathies, who are invariably adopted as honorary uncles by such sweet young things as Patricia. He had never married—perhaps because he was too essentially safe and comfortable and tolerant

for any woman to choose him as a partner in such a wild adventure as matrimony.

"And when do we congratulate you?" he asked, pursuing the rôle of his privilege. "There could hardly be a better match—young Templar's exciting enough to make any maiden heart beat faster."

It was no less than she could have wished. He saved her the trouble of leading up to the subject.

"I was just going to ask you what you thought of it," she remarked.

"Then may I first make the conventional felicitations?"

"Not yet. I came to ask your opinion to help me decide."

"But surely your aunt is the proper person——"

"I've already asked her. Now I want your advice as well."

He tilted the battered Trilby farther over his ear.

"This is a horrible responsibility to have thrust upon one," he complained. "Even the aged and presumably wise have been known to err in their verdicts upon the rising generation. Still, if you insist. . . . Well, the first objection you must face is that every other woman he meets will want to take him away from you. Dark, dare-devil, romantic fire-eaters like him are scarce these days, and the few there are can take their pick. Not that I don't thoroughly agree with his choice. But——"

"Perhaps," she suggested sweetly, "there might be a quite averagely nice man who would want to take me away from Mr. Templar. I don't want to seem conceited, but you can't have it all *your* way."

He stared, then laughed.

"That's a point of view," he admitted.

"Now let's go and sit in the shade and be serious," she pleaded. "And just when we're nearly coming to blows you can give me some tea and I shall collapse."

They walked over to a couple of wicker chairs that stood under a tree at the side of the house.

"Are you really serious?" he questioned as they settled themselves.

She nodded.

"Absolutely. And you're so old and clever I'm sure you can help."

He grimaced.

"You needn't rub in the patriarchal part," he said, "though I admit it myself. But you may spread yourself on the subject of my first-class brain. And what am I to say? I know less about young Templar than you do."

"People say all sorts of things about him."

Lapping looked reproachful.

"Was there ever a village that didn't say all sorts of things about inhabitants who weren't utterly commonplace—and rumours even spring up about the most prosaic people."

She shook her head.

"It isn't all rumour," she said.

Then, as Simon had recommended, she told the whole story of the previous night's events, omitting very little. She told him about Bittle's amazing announcement and ultimatum, and about Agatha Girton's confirmation of the millionaire's statement. She dwelt at length on the Saint's irregular behaviour, and on the curious incident at Carn's. But she did not mention the Saint's parting warning.

He listened attentively. Watching his face, she saw only a slight smile, as of a mellowed elder making allow-

ances for the irresponsibility and supercharged imagination of youth, and that comprehensive tolerance hardly changed as she piled mystery upon mystery and thrill upon thrill. But for the warning which the Saint had drilled into her, to trust nobody, she would have accepted Lapping as honorary uncle in all sincerity, without hesitation. It was almost impossible to believe that this congenial, simple-minded, clean-looking man could be an associate of the Tiger's—but then, it was almost as hard to realize that he possessed one of the keenest legal brains of his day, and that those pleasant brown features had assumed the inexorable mask of Justice and the same lips that smiled so avuncularly now had pronounced sentence of death upon many men.

Presently her recital was finished, and she was waiting for his response. He pulled a flowery bandanna from his pocket and blew his nose loudly, and then he turned to her with twinkling gray eyes.

"It's certainly got the makings of a good story," he confessed calmly.

"But it happened!" she insisted. "All in a few hours, last night. Surely you must see that there's something queer in the wind? There's some foundation to those rumours, but there's always the chance that the gossips have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. Do you think Mr. Templar's a detective?"

He shrugged.

"Who am I to say? Do detectives behave like that except in detective stories?"

She played crestfallen, looking at him appealingly.

"You must know a lot about detectives, and if you say they don't, then I suppose he's a crook. But I can't believe that!"

"If a crook couldn't convince people that he was honest," Lapping pointed out, "he'd have to give up the game and go into the workhouse."

"But Mr. Templar's different."

"They always are," said Lapping cynically.

But a mocking spray of wrinkles remained creased up at the corners of his eyes, and his mouth was still half smiling. That wasn't the way a man who wanted to blacken another in the eyes of an infatuated girl would go about it. She challenged him.

"You're still ragging," she accused—"and I wish you wouldn't. *Please* be solemn, just for a minute."

"But what's the use?" he temporized. "In any case, either you love him already or you don't. Which is it?"

"I do," she answered defiantly.

He made a gesture of humorous despair.

"If that's true, nothing anyone can say will change you. The law is taken out of my hands. If I say I believe in him, you'll fall on my neck and say how wise I am to see deeper than everybody else. If I say I don't believe in him, and advise you to give him up, you'll call me a spiteful old fool, and rush off and fall on *his* neck and tell him that you don't care what the rest of the world says. So what can I do?"

"Just give me your honest opinion. What would you advise me to do if I were your daughter, for instance?"

He winced.

"Still harping on my gray hairs!" he protested. "However, shall we stick to our former argument? You love him, and that's all there is to be said. I've had a lot of experience with lawbreakers, and unofficially I'm broadminded about them. There are only three kinds of criminal. The first is the small sneak-thief who's been

brought up to it from childhood: he's petty, whining, or bullying according to size, and he spends most of his life in prison—but to him that's part of the game. Obviously, Templar doesn't fall into that category. The second type is the clever man with a kink: he does fairly well for himself, till one day he makes a slip and ends up in the dock. He may be bred to it like the first kind, or he may drift into crime because he thinks he sees bigger rewards for his cleverness there than in legitimate professions. But he's a coward and a snake—and, obviously again, that lets Templar out. The distinction's rather a fine one, but I think you can put it that the worst kink in type the second is that he can't laugh like a completely sane man; and Templar's got such a refreshingly boyish sense of humour. The third and last type is the Raffles. He's common in fiction, but he only occurs once in a blue moon outside a novelist's imagination; he does it more for the thrill than anything. Templar might be that, quite easily; but that kind is always clean, and if he loves you you've nothing to worry about. So suppose we agree that that's the worst we can say about him—and we can even excuse some of that on the grounds of youthful high spirits and an impetuous desire for adventure. Are you satisfied?"

Lapping had delivered this discourse in a kindly and charitable way, such as a man might use who had seen too much of the world to judge anyone hastily and who understood enough to be able to pardon much, and Patricia found it hard to doubt his sincerity. Still, she had a card or two yet to play, and she did not intend to let the Saint down by allowing herself to be too easily won.

"You're a wonderful help, Sir Michael," she said.

"You've more or less expressed what I feel myself. . . . It's a comfort to know that I'm not alone in my lunacy."

"I think, though," he warned her, "you ought to ask the young man to give his own explanation. If he trusts you, and if he's the type I gather he is, he'll make a clean breast of it all. Hasn't he told you anything about himself?"

She was instantly on her guard.

"What sort of things?" she countered, and he showed surprise that she should ask such a question.

"Well, things! He can't have expected you not to be at all curious about the reason for these extraordinary goings-on."

"He just told me I must be patient and believe in him. He said it would be dangerous for me to know too much, but that once it was all cleared up and the enemy was out of the way he'd be able to explain it all."

"And who is this mysterious enemy?"

"Mr. Templar calls him the Tiger—I don't know why."

Lapping knitted his brows for a time in thought.

"I seem to recognize the nickname," he said. "Wait a minute. . . . Wasn't there a sensation in the papers some time ago? A Chicago gang called the Tiger Cubs had broken a bank and escaped with an enormous sum of money in gold—something of the sort."

She kept her face perfectly blank.

"I can't remember," she said. "It doesn't convey anything to me."

"I can't place it on the spur of the moment, but I'm certain it was something like that. But a Chicago gang leader in Baycombe! That sounds rather far-fetched."

"I know it does," she granted ruefully. "But so do

some of the true things I've told you this afternoon."

His hand just touched her arm. He smiled again—his frequent friendly smile that was so nearly irresistible even to her newborn suspicion of everything and everybody. But one thing checked her impulse to believe in him and look for enemies elsewhere. She was looking into his face, and she would have sworn that there lurked in his eyes a glimmer of suppressed amusement.

"Then shall we give it up?" he said. "We could argue for hours, and get no farther. All you can do is to possess your soul in patience. Sooner or later events will prove whether your intuition is right or wrong, and then you will be able to make your decision with a clearer vision. Meanwhile, you can only act as your heart dictates. There's a trite and priggish piece of sentimental moralizing for you! But what else can an old fogey offer?"

"You're too silly!" she laughed. "I'm awfully grateful."

"Then, having temporarily settled the fate of the greatest romance in history, what about the tea you promised yourself?"

She thanked him, and he rose and went into the house to give the order and tidy himself up.

She was glad of the respite, for she was finding it a strain to obey the Saint's injunction and maintain the pose of a kind of cross between a sleuth, a conspirator, and a fugitive with a price on her head. And Lapping, after so obligingly leading the conversation into the path she wanted it to follow, had given her no help at all. He was very winning and benevolent, and quite at his ease. All her baiting of the trap and stealthy stalking of her quarry had yielded not a trace of a guilty con-

science. But there was still the disturbing matter of his amusement to account for. She had an uncomfortable and exasperating feeling that he was quietly making fun of her—that her crude and clumsy attempts to make him give himself away afforded him a secret malicious delight. He had given nothing away, and that fact only reënforced her growing belief that he had something to give if he chose to do so.

It was a disconcerting realization to have to face—that Lapping had read through her studied innocence and seen her for nothing more or less than the emissary of the Saint, and that he was simply playing with her. Would any law-abiding man, however tolerant, have been quite so broadminded? She began to doubt it, while she had to admit that her grounds for doing so were very flimsy. If Lapping were high up in the Tiger Cubs, he would be a clever man, and a clever man would know that to try to turn her against the Saint would immediately arouse suspicion of his motives; whereas by taking the Saint's part he might hope to inveigle her into regarding him as a potential ally. But how could an ex-judge, most of whose life had been led in the glaring light of publicity, have managed to enter such a gang as the Tiger's? Her brain reeled in a dizzy maze of impossible theories, of profound subtleties and supercrafty countersubtleties. If Lapping were in league with the Tiger, and had seen through her, how high would he be likely to rate her intelligence? For according to that rating he would be skilfully gauging her psychological reactions to his insidious attack, so that on the very points where she thought he had betrayed himself he would have fooled her into making exactly the deductions he wanted her to make. And to beat him at that

game she would have to be just a shade cleverer than he gave her credit for being—and how clever was that? For the first time she got an insight into the true deadly technique of the "sport" she had taken up so lightheartedly.

Now Lapping emerged from the house, carrying a folding table. Behind him followed his housekeeper with the tray of tea things. For an instant Patricia was seized with panic. Suppose Lapping were one of the Tiger Cubs—even the Tiger himself—and had discovered her object and decided to remove her? The tea could be drugged, cakes could be poisoned. She choked back an impulse to rush away, forcing herself to think of Simon. What would the Saint have done in the circumstances? Well, for a start, he'd never have allowed them to arise. But how would he face them if they had arisen? She compelled herself to deal logically with her fear, and the answer came. Whatever Lapping might be, and however much he suspected, he wouldn't dare to do anything to her just then, because of the possibility that the Saint might be keeping an eye on the proceedings, watching and waiting to see if Lapping would fall for the temptation and so incriminate himself. The answer was sound. Patricia relaxed, and greeted Lapping with a friendly smile when he arrived.

"I feel I'm giving you a lot of trouble," she apologized.

He waved her excuses aside.

"Not at all, my dear Miss Holm. It's a pleasure. And the trouble is negligible—for a bachelor, I'm very domesticated, and dispensing tea is one of my social assets."

He was genial and unreserved. The secret amuse-

ment which she had noticed was no longer evident. Either he had ceased to see the funny side of the situation, or his pleasure in it had become too great to show. She found herself again falling under the spell of his avuncular bonhomie, but the memory of that half-hidden mockery in his eyes continued to bother her. Wouldn't a man with nothing to conceal have shown his amusement openly, if he found anything comic in being appealed to for advice on such a matter? What other explanation could there be except the one that Lapping was playing a shrewd game?

Perhaps the Saint would know. The bare facts must be placed in his possession at once, for Patricia felt that she was hopelessly out of her depth. She ate and drank sparingly, praying for the earliest moment at which she could take her leave without seeming in too great a hurry. Lapping, either ignoring her perturbation or failing to see any signs of it, chatted pleasantly; Patricia did her best to keep up the part she was playing. She must have done it successfully, for he appeared pained and surprised when she made a tentative move to gather up her belongings.

"Must you leave me so soon?"

"I've promised to see my aunt before dinner," she said. "There's some business to talk over—something about my investments. It's an awful bore, but the letter's got to be written to-night so that it can go off first thing in the morning."

It was amazing what a fluent and convincing liar she had become of a sudden.

"Needless to say, I'm heartbroken," he vowed, pressing her hand. "But perhaps I can hope that you'll come again? I'll talk as seriously as you want me to—I think

I can understand your difficulty, and perhaps, with all due respect to Miss Girton, I'm the best qualified person in Baycombe to advise you. Perhaps you could even arrange to bring Mr. Templar with you? He needn't know that I have your confidence."

"I'll try to get him to see you," she averred truthfully.

"I'd be delighted. I'm very idle, and I hate ceremony, so we don't have to bother about a formal invitation. Just drop in without notice—you'll find me at your service."

She thanked him, and he escorted her to the gate. She had just passed through it when an inspiration struck her. And the blow staggered her, so desperate and daring was the idea. But she carried it out before she had time to falter.

"By the way," she said, "how's Harry the Duke?"

The question sprang to her lips so artlessly and naturally, so apropos of nothing that they had been talking about for a long time, that she could not have contrived it better to take him off his guard. She was watching his face keenly, knowing how much depended on his reaction. But not a muscle twitched and his eyes did not change—she was studying those intently, well aware that the expression of the eyes is a hard thing for even the most masterly bluffer to control. He looked surprised, and thought for a second.

"Why, whatever makes you ask that?" he inquired in frank bewilderment.

"Simon—Mr. Templar mentioned that you'd once sentenced a dangerous criminal of that name, and he said he thought the man might make an attempt on your life."

He nodded.

"Yes, I remember—Templar said as much to me the first time we met. Harry the Duke swore from the dock that he'd get even with me. But I've heard the same threat several times, and I'm still alive, and it hasn't spoiled my sleep."

Patricia made her escape as soon after that as she could. She had to confess herself utterly baffled. However Lapping had behaved earlier in the afternoon, his response to that startling question of hers could not have been more open or more genuine. The name of Harry the Duke conveyed nothing more to Lapping than a crook he had sent to prison in the course of his duty—she would have given her oath for it. He had been unaffectedly taken off his guard, and yet there had been no vestige of fear or suspicion in his puzzlement. Could a guilty man have accomplished such a feat—even if he were the most consummate actor that was ever born?

The girl felt a crying need for Simon Templar's superior knowledge and acuter judgment. She was helpless—beaten. But for the amusement she had detected in Lapping's eyes, she would not have hesitated to acquit him. Even now she was strongly impelled to do so, in the light of developments subsequent to that, and she was casting around for some theory that would eliminate any malevolent motive and still account satisfactorily for the indisputable fact that he had seen at once what she had been driving at and had calmly and effectively refused to allow himself to be inveigled into saying any more than he chose to say.

But then—the realization only came to her with stunning conviction when she was walking up the drive to the Manor—if Lapping were blameless, then the only person who could be the Tiger was Agatha Girton!

Chapter XIII

THE BRAND

SHE was aghast at the thought.

Could she have been living for months and years in the home of the Tiger? It seemed impossible, and yet the theory seemed to get more watertight with every second. It would account for Agatha Girton's continual absences abroad, and the letters which came from the Riviera could easily have been fake alibis. But in that case the trip to South Africa would have been real enough—the Tiger would naturally have gone there to look for a derelict gold mine to salt with his plunder, as the Saint had explained. And she remembered that Agatha Girton had been away just about the time when the Tiger had broken the Confederate Bank.

So the Tiger was a woman! That was not outside the bounds of credibility, for Miss Girton would have had no trouble in impersonating a man.

Patricia had to fight down her second panic that afternoon before she could open the front door and enter the house. It struck her as being unpleasantly like walking into the Tiger's jaws as well as walking into his den—or *her* den. If Miss Girton were the Tiger, she would already be suspicious of Patricia's sudden friendship with Simon Templar; and that suspicion would have been fortified by the girl's adventure of the previous night

and her secretiveness about it. Then, if Lapping was suspect also, it would not be long before the Tiger's fears would be confirmed, and she would be confronted with the alternatives of making away with Patricia or chancing the girl's power to endanger her security. And, from all Simon's accounts of the Tiger, there seemed little doubt on which course the choice would fall.

The Tiger must be either Lapping or Miss Girton. The odds about both stared Patricia in the face—and it looked as if Aunt Agatha won hands down.

At that moment the girl was very near to flying precipitately back to the Pill Box and surrendering all the initiative to Simon: the thought of his trust in her checked that instinct. She had been so stubbornly insistent on being allowed to play her full part, so arrogantly certain of her ability to do it justice, so impatient of his desire to keep her out of danger—what would he think of her if she ran squealing to his arms as soon as the fun looked like becoming too fast and furious? To have accepted his offer of sanctuary would not necessarily have lowered her in his eyes; but to have refused it so haughtily and then to change her mind as soon as she winded the first sniff of battle would be a confession of faintheartedness which he could not overlook.

"No, Patricia Holm," she said to herself, "that's not in the book of the rules, and never has been. You would have a taste of the soup, and now you've fallen in you've jolly well got to swim. He wouldn't say anything, I know, and he'd be as pleased as Punch—for a day or two. But after a bit he'd begin to think a heap. And then it'd all be over—smithereened! And that being so we'll take our medicine without blubbering, even if the jam has worn a trifle thin. . . . Therefore,

Patricia Holm, as our Saint would say, where do we go from here?"

Well, she'd done all she could about Lapping, and she must wait to see what he thought of the evidence. There remained Agatha Girton, and the Saint's orders must be obeyed under that heading the same as under the other. Patricia braced herself for the ordeal, and just then her hand touched something hard in her pocket. She brought it out and took a peep at it—the automatic which Simon had given her. It was marvellously encouraging to remember that that little toy could at the touch of her finger splutter a hail of sudden death into anyone who tried to put over any funny business. She put it back in her pocket and patted it affectionately.

The housekeeper, emerging from the kitchen to see who had come in, informed her that Miss Girton had returned half an hour since, and Patricia felt her heart pounding unevenly as she went to the drawing room.

To her surprise, the door was locked. She rattled the handle, and presently Agatha Girton answered.

"Who's that?"

"Me—Patricia."

"I can't see you now."

The girl frowned.

"It's important," she persisted. "I want to talk to you."

"Well, I'm busy, and I can't spare the time. Come back presently—or if you're upstairs I'll call you when I'm ready."

Patricia's fist clenched, but it was no use making a scene. She would have to wait till Agatha Girton came out.

But what was this secrecy for? Miss Girton had never

before locked herself up in the drawing room. Nor, before last night, had she even spoken so abruptly without cause—it seemed as if she was actually frightened and jumpy. And what was this new occupation which demanded such privacy and such complete isolation?

Patricia went slowly up to her room, racking her brain to fit the pieces in the jig saw together. Was the Tiger rattled after all? Had Simon succeeded as well as that, and was the Tiger even then concentrating on evolving some master stroke of strategy that would release the Tiger Cubs from the net which was drawing round them and at the same time destroy the man who had come so near to defeating them? They were not beaten yet, but the final struggle was only a few hours away—and was it dawning upon the Tiger Cubs that they had almost fatally underestimated their opponent?

There was no time to lose. Already it was getting late, and Aunt Agatha had to be interviewed and a light dinner bolted before Orace arrived to take her back to the Saint punctually for the attack they had planned. The girl kicked off her shoes, stripped to her stockings, and pulled on her bathing costume. She discarded the light dress she had worn and replaced it with a serviceable tweed skirt and a pullover. The automatic went into a pocket in the skirt, and a pair of brogues completed the outfit. So clad, she felt ready for anything.

It was as she was lacing her shoes that she heard a sound which she had not noticed while moving about the room. It came from beneath the floor, muffled and very faint—a murmur of voices. And the drawing room was right under her feet.

She stood up quickly and tiptoed to the window, but the windows of the drawing room must have been shut,

for she was able to hear better inside than by leaning out. Then Miss Girton was not alone! But the mutter was so low that Patricia could not even distinguish the voices, though she pressed her ear against the floor, except that she was able to make out that both had a masculine timbre. Aunt Agatha's would be one. Whose was the other?

The girl realized at once the importance of finding out further details about this conference. If she could get a look at the visitor, and overhear some of the conversation, the result might be of inestimable value, for there could be no disputing the fact that all the circumstances combined to adorn the incident with a distinctly fishy aspect. And if the clue provided were as damning as she hoped it would be, and she were caught eavesdropping . . . The girl drew a long breath and felt again for the reassuring heavy sleekness of her weapon. She had told the Saint that she could be more help than hindrance to him, and now was the time to prove it. The risk attached to the enterprise would have to be faced in the Saintly manner—with a devil-may-care smile and a shrug and a pious hope that the Lord would provide.

"Carry on, brave heart," said Patricia, and opened the door.

She crept noiselessly down the stairs, but on the last flight she had to stop and deliberate. There were two ways: the door or the windows. The keyhole seemed easier, but she had just remembered that every board in the floor of the old hall had its own vociferous creak. She would have to spy from the garden.

She listened, leaning over the banisters, but the walls and the door were more solid affairs than the floor, and the people in the drawing room must have been talking

in subdued tones—perhaps they had just realized the possibility of their being overheard. She could barely catch a whisper of their speech.

As silently as she had descended she climbed the stairs again. The door of Miss Girton's room stood open, and she went in, crossed swiftly, and opened the casement windows. This room was on the opposite side of the house to the drawing room, and just beneath the windows was a kind of shed with a sloping roof. As a schoolgirl, Patricia had often clambered through those windows and taken perilous toboggan rides down the slates, saving herself from the drop by catching her heels in the gutter. Now she was bigger, and the stunt had no terrors for her.

Slithering swiftly over the sill she gathered up her skirt, held on for a second, and then let herself slide. Rotten as it was, the gutter stopped her as safely as it had ever done, in spite of her increased weight. Then she worked herself over the edge, let herself down as far as she could, and let herself fall the remaining five feet, landing lightly on the grass below.

She doubled round the house, and then she had a set-back, for the curtains of the drawing-room windows were drawn, and the windows themselves were closed. This had not been so when she came in. Returning from Lapping's, she approached the house from the drawing-room side, and she could not have failed to notice anything so out of the ordinary, for Aunt Agatha verged on the cranky in her passion for fresh air and light even in the most unseasonable weather. Had the visitor, then, arrived after Patricia, or had the curtains been drawn for fear of her nosing round in the garden?

That, however, could be debated later. She stole up

and examined both the French windows, but even from the outside she could see that they were fastened, and the hangings had been so carefully arranged that not even a hair's breadth of the room was visible. She could have cried with vexation.

She meditated smashing a pane of glass and bursting in, but a moment's reflection showed her the futility of that course. Simon Templar might have brought it off, but she did not feel so confident of her own power to force the pace. And with two of them against her, in spite of the automatic she might be tricked and overpowered. At a pinch she would have made the attempt, but the issue was too great to take such a chance when a man far more competent to deal with the matter was waiting to do his stuff if she could learn enough to show him where to make the raid. And the one certain thing in a labyrinth of mystery was that a man who visits somebody else's house generally leaves it again sooner or later.

She looked around for a hiding place, and saw at once the summerhouse in a corner of the garden. From there she could watch both the drawing-room windows and the front door—no observation post could have been better placed. She sprinted across to it. There was a window ideally placed, half overgrown with creeper, and through that she could see without being seen. Patricia settled down to her vigil.

It was about then that her name cropped up in the conversation which was taking place in the drawing room, but that she could not know.

"One little pill—and such a little one!" remarked the man who was talking to Agatha Girton, and he

placed the tiny white tablet carefully in the centre of the table. "You wouldn't think it could make a grown woman sleep like a log for about six hours, would you? But that's what it'll do. Just put it in her coffee after dinner—it'll dissolve in no time—and she'll pass out within five minutes. Lay her out comfortably on the sofa, and I'll collect her about eleven."

He was a tall, sparsely built man, and although they were alone he kept his soft hat pulled low down over his eyes and his coat collar was turned up to his chin so that only part of his face was visible.

"You can do your own murdering," snapped Agatha Girton in a strained voice, but the man only laughed.

"Not murder, I promise you. She's strong, and all she'll get will be a slight headache to-morrow morning. You can't imagine I'd kill such a charming girl!"

Miss Girton leaned across the table, thrusting her face down close to him, but in the gloom the shadow of his hat brim fell across his features like a mask.

"Swine!" she hissed.

He moved his hand protestingly.

"Your newly acquired righteousness isn't wasted," he said. "I'm honestly very fond of Patricia, but I'm afraid she wouldn't take me seriously as things are. So let us say that I propose to apply the rather unconventional methods of Miss Hull's sheiks."

"I am also very fond of Patricia," said Miss Girton.

"You ought to tell her," replied the man sardonically. "But mind you break it to her gently. No, my dear, that shouldn't trouble you very much. On a suitable occasion I shall ask Patricia to marry me, and nothing could be more respectable than that."

Miss Girton stared.

"Why lie?" she asked bitterly. "There are no witnesses."

"But I mean it," persisted the man.

The woman's gaunt face twisted in a sneer, and there was a venomous hatred in her eyes.

"Some people say that all crooks are slightly mad," she answered. "I'm beginning to think they're right."

The man lifted his face a trifle, so that he could look reproachfully at her. He ignored her sally, but he spoke again in a soft, dreamy, singsong tone.

"I was never more serious in my life. I have succeeded in my profession. In my way I am a great man. I am educated, clever, cultured, travelled, healthy, entertaining. I have all the wealth that a man could desire. My youth is passing away, though I still look very young. But I see the best years slipping past and leaving me alone. I love Patricia. I must do this to show her that I am in earnest; afterward she will refuse me nothing. . . ."

The voice trailed away, and Miss Girton wrenched a chair round savagely.

"Mad!" she muttered, and he sat up with a start.

"What was I saying?" His eye fell on the glistening white pellet marooned in the expanse of polished walnut. "Oh, yes. Do you understand?"

Agatha Girton came close to him again.

"You're mad," she rasped—"I'll tell you so again. With all this money, all this wealth you boast about, why did you have to put the black on me? If you're so rich, what was a mere twenty thousand to you?"

"One can never have too much," said the man. "And now, as things have fallen out, it is all going back where

it belongs—as a dowry. Anyhow, is twenty thousand so much to pay for liberty, and even life? They might manage to get you for murder, you know, Aunt Agatha."

"Don't call me Aunt Agatha."

"Then——"

"Nor that, either."

The man shrugged.

"Very well, O Nameless One," he said with calculated insolence. "Remember this, Nameless One, that I have taken a lot of money from you, but now I want something that money cannot buy. And you will give it to me. . . . Otherwise—— But you dare not be stupid!"

Miss Girton still looked at him with those deep-set eyes of hate.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "For years you've made my life a misery. I've a mind to end it. And putting you where you belong might make them forget some of the things they know about me. The busies are always kind to squeakers."

The man was silent for a short space; then he put up his hand and pulled his hat a little farther over his eyes. He turned his head, but he could only have seen her feet.

"I am not like the busies," he returned in a voice that was cold and flat and hard like a sheet of ice. "Don't talk like that—or I might be tempted to put you where you will have no power to threaten me."

He stood up and walked to the door, his hands in the side pockets of his coat and his shoulders hunched up. He turned the key and pulled the door open quickly and silently. Leaning out, he glanced up and down the hall, then half pulled the door to while he spoke to Miss Girton.

"I can let myself out. The lady is upstairs, isn't she?"

"I heard her moving about overhead a little while ago."

He waited a moment, as though listening.

"Your ears are better than mine," he said, and looked at her warningly. "Do exactly as I told you, and don't try to double-cross me. You mightn't succeed. Good-evening."

The door closed behind him, and she could hear him moving across the hall.

For a moment she hesitated.

Then she crossed the room swiftly and pulled out the drawer of the writing bureau. She felt in the cavity and tugged. When she straightened up there was a small automatic pistol in her hand. She went to the windows at the front, snapping back the jacket of the gun as she did so and pushing over the safety catch.

The heavy curtains swung away as she jerked at the cord that controlled them, and she saw the man hurrying down the drive. Without looking round, he turned and went down the road to the left, and Agatha Girton opened the French windows and stepped out on to the terrace. The range was about twenty-five yards, but the hedge at the bottom of the garden was a low one, and his body could be seen above it from the waist upward.

Miss Girton raised the gun and extended her arm slowly and steadily, as she might have done in a Bisley competition. At that moment the man turned to the right again into a field, and so his back was squarely presented to her.

The echoes of the two rapid shots rattled clamorously in the still air of the evening. She saw the man fling up his arms, stagger, and fall out of sight.

Suddenly she found Patricia beside her.

"Who was it?" gasped the girl, white-faced and shaking. "What have you done?"

"Killed him, I hope," said Agatha Girton coolly.

She was standing on tiptoe, gazing out into the gathering dusk, trying to see the result of her shooting. But there was the hedge at the end of the Manor garden and the hedge that lined the field into which the man had passed, both hiding the more distant ground from her, and she could see no sign of him.

"Stay here while I go and see," she commanded.

She walked quickly down the drive, and the automatic still swung in her hand. Patricia saw her enter the field.

The man was lying on the grass, sprawled out on his back. His hat had fallen off, and he stared at the sky with wide eyes. Miss Girton put down her gun and bent over him, feeling for the beating of his heart. . . .

Patricia heard the woman's shrill scream; and then she saw Agatha Girton standing up, swaying, with her hands over her face.

The girl's fingers closed over the butt of the automatic in her pocket as she raced down the drive and out into the road. Miss Girton was still standing up with her face in her hands, and Patricia saw with a sudden dread that blood was streaming down between the woman's fingers. There was no trace of the man.

"He was shamming," gasped Agatha Girton. "I put down my gun—he caught me—he had a knife . . ."

"What's he done?"

Miss Girton did not answer at once. Then she pointed to a clump of trees and bushes in the far corner of the field, which was not a big one.

"He took the gun and ran that way—there's a sunken lane beyond."

"I'll go after him," said Patricia, without stopping to think of the consequences, but Agatha Girton caught her arm in a terrible grip.

"Don't be a little fool, child!" she grated. "That's death. . . . I lost my head. . . . All he said was: *'Don't do it again!'* "

The woman's hands were dripping red, and Patricia had to lead her back to the house and up the stairs.

Agatha Girton went to the basin and filled it. She bathed her face, and the water was hideously dyed. Then she turned so that the girl could see, and Patricia had to bite back an involuntary cry of horror, for Miss Girton's forehead was cut to the bone in the shape of a capital T.

Chapter XIV

CAPTAIN PATRICIA

"HE BRANDED me—the Tiger——" Agatha Girton's voice was pitched hysterically. "By God . . ."

Her face had become the face of a fiend. Hard and grim it always was—now, with smears of blood from brow to chin and her hair straggling damply over her temples, it was devilish.

"I'll get even for this one day. . . . I'll make him crawl. . . . Red-hot irons are too good for that——"

"But, Aunt Agatha——"

Patricia was full of questions, and it seemed the right moment to let some of them off, but Miss Girton turned on her like a wild beast, and the girl recoiled a step from the blaze of fury in those smouldering eyes.

"Go away."

"Was that the man who's been blackmailing you?"

"Go away."

"And is he the Tiger?"

Miss Girton took a pace forward and pointed to the door.

"Leave me, child," she said in a terrible voice. "Go back to your Saint before I forget—— If you aren't outside in a second I'll throw you out."

She meant it. Patricia had never seen and hoped she would never see again a woman's face so contorted with passion. There was nothing to do.

"Very well," said Patricia steadily. "I'll go. I hope you won't be sorry."

"Go, then."

The girl flung up her head and marched to the door.

Go back to Simon? She would. There wasn't much risk about walking over to the Pill Box, she thought, and the feel of the automatic in her pocket gave her all the courage she needed. The Saint wouldn't be expecting her, but he could hardly object, considering the news she was bringing him. It had been an eventful afternoon—more eventful than he could possibly have foreseen—and, since there was nothing more that she could achieve on her own, it was essential that he should be provided with all the news up to date.

The time had passed quickly. It was twenty to seven when she set out: she came in sight of the Pill Box toward a quarter past, having taken it easy, and by that time it was nearly dark.

The sea shone like dull silver, reflecting all the last rays of twilight, and from the top of the cliff Patricia strained to see the ship they had observed that morning. She thought she could make out the tiniest of black dots on the horizon, but she would not have sworn to it. That was the ship that the Saint and Orace and she were scheduled to capture by themselves, and the monumental audacity of the scheme made her smile. But it was just because the scheme was so impossible that the prospect of attempting to carry it out did not bother her at all: it was the sort of reckless dare-devil thing that people did in books and films, the forlorn hope that always materialized in time to provide a happy ending. She could think of no precedent for it in real life, and therefore the only thing to go by was the standard of

fiction—according to which it was bound to succeed. But she wondered if any man living except the Saint—*her* Saint—would have had the imagination to think of it, the courage to work out the idea in all seriousness, the heroic foolhardiness to try and bring it off, and the personality to captain the adventure. She and Orace were nothing but his devoted lieutenants: the whole fate of the long hazard rested on the Saint's broad shoulders.

With a shrug and a smile that showed her perfect teeth—a smile of utter fearlessness that Simon would have loved to see—the girl turned away and strolled across to the Pill Box. There was a light in the embrasure which she knew served for a window in the dining-drawing-smoking-sitting room, but when she peeped in she saw only Orace laying dinner. She went in and he swung round at the sound of her footsteps.

She was amused but perplexed to see his face light up and then fall again as he recognized her.

"Where's Mr. Templar?" she asked, and he almost glared at her.

"Back ut arf pas' sevin," he growled.

He picked up his tray and stalked off toward the kitchen, and the girl stared after him in puzzlement. Orace, though a martinet, was only actually rude to Tiger Cubs and detectives: she had already seen through his mask of ferocity and discovered the kindly humanist underneath. On the last occasion of his escorting her home his manner had been even paternal, for Simon Templar's friends were Orace's friends. But this, now, was a ruffled Orace.

She followed him to the kitchen.

"Can I help you with anything?" she inquired cheerfully.

"Naow, don't think sa, miss," he replied gruffly. "I'm use ter mannidging alone—thanks."

"Then could you tell me where Mr. Templar's gone? I could walk on and meet him."

Orace hammered the point of a tin opener into a can of salmon with quite unnecessary violence.

"Dunno anythink about it," he said. "You can betcha life, miss, 'e'll be 'ome when 'e said 'e would, if 'e can 'umanly possibly do ut. Most thunderin' punctual man alive, 'e is, an 'e'll come in the door just when the clock strikes. So yer got nuffin ta worry about."

He ended on a more gentle note, but there was no doubt that he was very upset.

"Why—has anything happened to make you think I'd be likely to worry?" Patricia queried, with her heart thumping a little faster. "Was he going to do anything special this afternoon?"

"Naaow!" snarled Orace, unconvincingly derisive, and went on hacking at the tin.

The girl went back to the sitting room and dropped into a chair. The Saint's cigarette box was handy to her elbow, and she took a cigarette and lighted it thoughtfully.

Whether she was intended to worry or not, there could be no denying the obvious fact that Orace was distinctly agitated. She found it was twenty minutes and a bit past seven, and wondered if the Saint would be as punctual as Orace had predicted, and whether they would have to assume that something had happened to him if he hadn't arrived within five minutes of the half-hour. Where could he have gone? There was nothing to be done about the Tiger's ship at that hour. Had he gone on a preliminary reconnaissance of the island?

Had he taken it into his head to inspect the Old House at closer quarters? Or had he gone over to beard Bittle or Bloem again—the sort of senseless bravado that would give a man like him a thrill?

She watched the minute hand of her watch travel down to the twenty-five-past mark, and reflected that she had been spending a good deal of her time lately with one eye on the clock, wondering if the Saint was going to be punctual or not. Heavens, he wasn't the only one who could be worried!

Orace came in and laid a place for her. Then he tugged an enormous silver turnip from his trousers pocket.

"In a minnit er two," he said. "Thunderin' punctual, 'e always is."

He nodded to her encouragingly, and strutted out. She heard his boots on the concrete floor outside, and guessed that he had gone to the entrance to see if he could spot the Saint coming up the hill.

At twenty-five to eight there was still no sign of the Saint.

Patricia took to moving restlessly about the room. She felt suddenly depressed. The Saint had gone swashbuckling off into the blue, without a word to anyone—and had blasted his reputation for punctuality. He might have been in so many different places, trying to do so many different things: she raged at her helplessness. She could only wait and wait and wait, and he'd either turn up or he wouldn't. No clue . . . Anything might have happened to him. She racked her brains to deduce where he would be most likely to have gone, and an appalling number of possibilities made faces at her and invited her to take her pick.

Orace came in again. He had taken off his apron and

put on his coat and a cap. One of his pockets bulged and sagged.

"I'm gonna see if I can find 'im, miss," he said. "But wiv yore permission I'll see you 'ome fust."

She stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Jus' lookin' rahnd, miss. 'E tole me wun or two plyces ta try. I'll find 'im orlright—don' chew worry."

"I'll come with you," she said at once.

He shook his head.

"Carn't 'ave ya doin' that. 'Fennything wuz ta 'appen ta yer, 'e'd kill me."

"Where do we go first?" she demanded, ignoring his reply.

"Where do *I* go fust?" he amended. "Well, I can tell ya that."

He fished the Saint's note out of his pocket and gave it to her. She read it through with growing apprehension. It had somehow failed to occur to her that he would automatically spend the time before evening in investigating the second possibility of the Old House —the disused inn behind the village. That was where he must have gone. Perhaps he had been trapped there. . . .

"Come on," she rapped, and led the way.

Outside, she took the path which led down to the inland end of the village, instead of the one which led to the opposite tor by way of the quay, and Orace hurried after her and caught her arm.

"Wrong wy, miss," he said.

She looked at him.

"This is the way I'm going."

"Sorry, miss," he persisted. "I carn't letcha do that."

"Can't you?" she said slowly. "I'm sorry, but I must. I'll show you——"

With a lightning twist she shook off his hand and ran. She could hear him racing lamely after her, shouting and imploring her to stop and think what the Saint would say, but she ran on like the wind. She went down the slope at break-neck speed, surefooted as a cat, but Orace limped along behind doggedly, sliding and stumbling in the steep darkness. Then a stone rolled under her foot: she jumped to save herself, caught her other foot in a tuft of grass, floundered, and went down in a heap. He had grabbed her before she could rise.

"I'm sorry, miss, but it's me dooty, an 'e'd sy the syme."

She got to her feet, shaken and breathless, but relieved to find that she had not even slightly twisted her ankle.

Orace felt something hard dig into his ribs, and knew what it was.

"Will this show you I'm serious?" she panted. "I'd hate to have to hurt you, Orace; but I will if you drive me to it. I've got to go."

He waited without stirring for a long time. He could easily have grabbed her wrist and taken the gun from her, but it was the sob in her voice that stopped him.

"Orl right," he said at last. "If it'll myke it easier for yer. . . ."

She knew then that he feared the worst.

They hurried on down the hill. She remembered his limp and let him set the pace, but he managed to struggle on at a good jog trot in spite of his lameness.

They went through the village until the black bulk of the Old House loomed before them.

"Will ya lead the wy, miss, since yer 'ere? I dunno this plice too well."

She took him round by the approach the Saint had used, but there was no need for the same caution, for the moon would not rise for another three hours. He stopped her at the door.

"Lemme go fust."

He thrust her behind him and blocked the way by his greater strength and weight, and she had to obey. She heard him fumble in his pockets, and then he kicked open the door and at the same moment a beam of light stabbed down the passage from the electric torch in his hand.

"See them footmarks?" he whispered. "Men's bin 'ere lytely, and I'll betcha they wuz Tiger Cubs."

The shaft of luminance broke on the table at the end of the corridor. The Saint had turned the box round, and from the side elevation its function was more easily deducible. Even so, it was creditably astute of Orace to stop dead in his tracks and turn suddenly to an examination of the door through which they had just come. He found the scar in the wood where the bullet had splintered it, and went back to make a study of the ground outside.

"Naow!" he announced at length. "*That* didn't catch Mr. Templar, like it ud uv cort me fee 'adn't put it ahter action."

He went down the passage again, keeping to the centre, so that she was forced to walk behind him and be shielded by his body. Her hand was on the automatic in her pocket, and, though every one of her

nerves was tense and tingling, her muscles felt strangely cold and calm. Just as a boxer, trained to a milligramme, is a bundle of tortured nerves up to the moment he enters the ring, when all at once his brain becomes clear and ice-cold as an Arctic sky and his body soothes down in a second into smooth efficiency—so Patricia's agony of fear and anxiety had frozen into a grim chilled-steel determination. The Saint had been there: they were on his track. The suspense and anguish of inaction was over.

Orace had halted just before he came to the open door.

"We better lookaht 'ere," he said.

She was looking round his shoulder as he turned the ray of the torch into the room, and they both saw the emptiness of it and the yawning square hole in the floor just inside the threshold.

Orace heard the girl give a strangled cry that choked in her throat. She would have rushed past him, but he caught and held her, though she fought him like a fury.

"Wyte—in a minnit!" he urged hoarsely.

He kept her back and edged toward the trap-door, testing the soundness of the floor inch by inch as he advanced. It was not until he had thus satisfied himself about the safety of the footing right up to the edge of the opening that he would allow her to approach it.

They knelt down and turned the light of the torch into the gap. It shot down far into the blackness till it lost itself in space. Higher up they could see that the shaft was circular and lined with green, slimy brick. Evidently they were looking down the remains of a well over which the Old House had been built: Patricia thought she could detect a faint glimmer of reflection

of the torch's light from the surface of the water. Orace fetched one of the empty beer bottles from across the room, and they dropped it down the pit. It seemed an eternity before the hollow sound of the splash returned to their ears.

"Bouter nundred feet," Orace guessed, and in this he was approximately right, being no more than sixty feet out.

The girl leaned over and cupped her hands.

"Simon!" she called. "Simon!"

Only the echo answered her.

"Mr. Templar, sir—Orace speakin'," bellowed the man, but it was only his own voice that boomed back out of the darkness in reply.

Patricia's face was bowed in her hands.

"Saint, Saint. . . . Oh, God. . . . My darling. . . ." The words came brokenly, dazedly. "Dear God, if you can save him now, give me his life!"

Presently she looked at Orace.

"Are you sure he went that way? The other trap didn't catch him."

Orace had been examining the pitfall, and now, by the light of the torch, he pointed to the evidence. A square of the flooring had been cut out with a keyhole saw, leaving only the flimsiest connections at the corners which the weight of a man would destroy at once. The jagged ends of broken wood could be seen at once, and from one of these Orace plucked a shred of tweed and brought it close to the light.

"That there's 'is," he said huskily. "Looks like 'e weren't expectin' it. . . . But don' chew lose 'art, miss —'e always wuz the luckiest man wot ever stepped. P'raps 'e's as right as ryne, lyin' aht cumfitible some-

where jus' lettin' the Tiger *think* 'e's a goner an' get keerless, an' orl set ready ter pop up an' 'ave the larf on 'im lyter."

It was not Orace's fault if he did not sound very convincing. His arm went clumsily about her, and drew her gently away and outside the room.

"One thing," he observed in an exaggeratedly commonplace tone, "ther carn't be no Tiger Cubs 'angin' arahnd 'ere naow—the noise we've myde, they'd uv bin buzzin' in like 'ornets be this time, if ther 'ad bin."

"Could we get a rope and go down?" she asked, striving to master her voice.

"I'll git sum men from the village to 'ave a look," he promised. "Ain't nothink we can do fer 'im fee *is* dahn there—'e'd uv gorn howers ago. . . ."

She leaned weakly against the wall, eyes closed and the tears starring on her cheeks, while Orace tried in his rough but kindly manner to console her. She hardly heard a word he said.

The Saint gone? A terrifying emptiness ached her heart. It was horrible to think of. Could a man like him be meant for such an end—to die alone in the unanswering darkness, drowned like a rat? He would have kept afloat for a long time, but if he had been alive and down there then he would have shouted back to them. Perhaps he had struck his head in the fall. . . .

And then, slowly, a change came over her.

There was still that hurtful lump in her throat, and the dead numbness of her heart, but she was no longer trembling. Instead, she found herself cold and quiet. The darkness was speckled with dancing, dizzy splashes of red. . . .

This was the Tiger's doing—he was the man who had sent Simon Templar to his death. And, with a bitter, dead, icy certainty, Patricia Holm knew that she would never rest until she had found the Tiger. . . .

"Come along, Miss Patricia," pleaded Orace. "It ain't so bad—we don't *know* 'e ever went dahn. Lemme tyke yer back, anjer can lie on the bed while I go explorin'; an' as soon's ever I 'ears anythink I'll come an' tell ya."

"No."

She snapped out the word in a voice that was as clear and strong as a tocsin.

"There ain't nothink——"

"There is," said Patricia. Her hands closed fiercely on Orace's shoulders. "There is. *We've got to go on with the job.* It's up to us. It's what he'd have wished—he wouldn't have had any patience with our going to weep in our corner and chuck in the towel and let the Tiger get away. If the Saint gave his life to get the Tiger, we can't waste the sacrifice. Orace," she said, "will you carry on with me?"

He only hesitated a moment; then she heard him suck in his breath.

"Yes, Miss Patricia," said Orace. "I guess yer right—we carn't let the Tiger get aw'y wiv it, an' we carn't let Mr. Templar 'ave gorn under fer nuffin. An' fee's gorn, I guess yer must in'erit Orace, miss. I'm on." He paused. "But 'adn't we better get 'old uv Dr. Carn, miss? 'E's a detective, really, Mr. Templar tole me, and 'e's after the Tiger."

"I suppose so. . . . We must hurry!"

They passed through the village, and Patricia set

off up the hill at a raking pace, with Orace toiling gamely along just behind.

Carn's cottage was in darkness, and the girl fairly flew to the front door and tugged at the bell furiously. She kept it up for a full minute, but no one answered, though they could hear the metallic clamour reverberating through the house.

"He's away," she said flatly.

The man could see her white face and compressed lips.

"I remember," he said. " 'E kyme up this afternoon ter warn me an' Mr. Templar that the Tiger was meanin' ter do us in to-night. An' I sore 'im drivin' orf along the Ilfracombe road in the farmer's trap, me eyes bein' rather good. . . . Carn's fahndart somefing. Wod did 'e wanter go ter Ilfracombe for?"

"If he *has* found out anything," said the girl swiftly, "he probably went off to call in some reënforcements. Perhaps he found out about the ship coming in to-night. And in that case he'll be back soon."

"Mos' likely," agreed Orace cautiously. "But yer carn't bet on it, yer know."

She bit her lip.

"That's true. We've got to make our arrangements and leave him out. If he arrives, so much the better. I don't know," said Patricia slowly, "that I wouldn't rather find the Tiger before Carn does."

Orace, that simple soul, was amazed at the concentrated savageness of her low, even voice. Women, in his philosophy, did not behave like this. But Patricia had the gift of leadership, and he had ceased to question her authority. He made no comment.

"We must wait till they come in for the gold," she

said. "We might as well go back to the Pill Box and have dinner. We shall want all our strength."

Of a sudden the girl had become a remorseless fighting machine. She had fallen into her part as if she had been born and trained for no other purpose. It was not so much that the rôle fitted her as that she was able to adapt herself to the rôle. She ruthlessly suppressed her grief, finding that the rush of action took her mind off the awful thought of Simon's fate. She allowed place in her brain for no other thought than that of trapping the Tiger and squaring up the account, and she concentrated on the task with every atom of force she could muster.

A sense of the unreality of the whole affair possessed her, drying up tears and crushing out sentiment. Her world was reeling and racing about her—the landmarks were hopelessly lost—but she felt herself poised above the chaos, remote and stable. The sword in her hand wielded her. *She was going on with the job.* The fight was going to be battled out to the last second, with the last ounce of vital energy in her body; for the time, she seemed to be beyond human limitations. When it was all over and settled one way or the other, the tension would snap and she would hurtle down into black abysses of terror and despair; but while the war was still to be waged she knew that hers was a strength greater than herself—knew that she could stand on the brink of the chasm in the blinding light and fight tirelessly on to the death.

She said, in that new, cold, dispassionate voice:

"We shall want help—the odds are too great against two of us. I'll get Mr. Lomas-Coper. He's the only man here I could trust."

"*'Im?*" spat the disgusted Orace. "That thunderin' jelly bag?"

"I know he's not such an ass as he pretends to be," said Patricia. "He'll weigh in all right."

They were nearing Bloem's house at that moment, and a lean dark figure loomed startlingly out of the shadow of the hedge. A pencil of luminance leaped from Orace's torch and picked up the pleasantly vacuous face of Algy himself.

"Is that you, Pat?" he said. "I thought I recognized your voice."

He was surprised at the firmness with which she grasped the limp paw he extended.

"I was just looking for you," she said crisply. "Come over to the Pill Box. We're going to have some dinner and hold a council of war."

"W-w-what?" stammered Algy.

"Don't waste time. I'll tell you when we get there."

There was so much crisp command in her tone that he fell in beside them obediently.

"But, dear old peach," he protested weakly. "There's no comic old war on, don't you know! Is it a joke? I'll buy it. Never say Algy isn't a sportsman, old darling."

"There's nothing very funny about it," she said, and something deadly about her obvious seriousness made him hold his peace for the rest of the journey.

In the Pill Box, she sat down at once to the food Orace provided, though Algy excused himself. He had already dined, and as a matter of fact, he explained, he had been on his way to visit her at the Manor.

While she ate she talked—in curt, cold sentences which held even the fatuous Algy intent. She told him the whole story from beginning to end, and his jaw

sagged lower and lower as the recital proceeded. And when it was finished she looked anxiously at him, wondering whether he would say something foolish and soothing about the heat of the day and the probability that she would feel better in the morning—or, if he believed her, whether he would show up yellow.

She was satisfied to find that her estimate had been correct. While she looked, he closed his mouth with a snap, and the tightening of his mouth lent a new strength to his face. His eyes were gazing steadily back at her, and there was a steady soberness in them which transformed him.

"Just like a shilling shocker—what?" said Algy quietly, but there was not much flippancy in his voice.

She outlined their plan, and he was staggered.

"You've a nerve!" he remarked. "But isn't that old Carn's job?"

"It was the Saint's idea," she told him; "and it's such a desperate gamble that it might as easily succeed as not. As for Carn—we daren't bank on him. He mightn't know as much as we think, and he mayn't have gone into Ilfracombe for the reason we suppose—we can only hope for the best. But we've got to be prepared to take the field without him. And, besides, as you'll understand, I've rather a special desire to meet the Tiger and talk to him alone. . . ."

For an amazing moment Algy saw death in her eyes; then, with the clenching of a small fist, the ferocity passed, and she was once again the cold, calculating general planning an attack.

"I know you swim pretty well," she said. "Can you do the distance?"

He nodded.

"I think so."

"Will you?"

No more than two seconds ticked away into eternity before he held out his hand.

Chapter XV

SPURS FOR ALGY

IT WAS then ten o'clock.

"The boat should be coming in now," said Patricia, and she and Algy went outside to look round.

They lay on the grass at the edge of the cliff, gazing out to sea. It was a cloudless night, and although there was as yet no moon, the stars shone brightly and covered the world with a dim silvery radiance. Starlight is the most deceptive and baffling of lights, but water is the easiest thing on earth to see over in the dark. The starlight etched in the tiny ripples over the sea, making it a wide, smooth expanse of glistening black and luminous gray; the island called the Old House sheered up from the calm flatness like some fabulous swarthy beast rising from the depths of the ocean.

"I can see the jolly old tub," breathed Algy excitedly.

The girl's hand closed over his arm like a vise.

"The Saint was right," she said.

But it was not so much seeing the ship as detecting a shadowy mast silhouetted against the sleek darkness of the waters. The hull could be picked out in a profile of blurred outline, where there showed no flicker of reflected luminosity from the facets of the wrinkled sea. The Tiger's bark must still have been six miles out from the coast, if not more.

Patricia watched it till her eyes ached.

"They must be coming in very slowly," she said. "They hardly seem to have moved in the last five minutes. Right under the Saint's bedroom window, they'd have to be careful."

"Smugglers and pirates all up to date—what?" remarked Algy. "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of Bass. . . ."

He was as eager as a schoolboy.

They returned to the Pill Box, and Patricia consulted her watch and made a rough calculation.

"They should be in about eleven, at this rate," she reckoned. "You'd better go home and slip on a bathing costume. And do you happen to have any firearms about the place?"

"I believe Uncle Hans stocks one."

She smiled, and took the automatic from her pocket.

"He doesn't now—Simon relieved him of it last night."

"Perhaps he's got another. I've an idea there used to be quite an armoury. I'll do my best."

"How long will it take you?"

He thought.

"I'll be back at eleven."

"Don't be later," she ordered. "It'd make it a longer swim if we went from the quay, but the tide's only just turned, so we can't get along the beach. We'll have to go over the cliff here—could you find enough strong rope?"

"I'll knock up a bloke in the village. He's got miles and miles of it—sells it to the stout mariners, y'know."

She nodded.

"Go ahead, then, Algy. I'll expect you back sharp at eleven."

"Oh, most frightfully rather!" promised Mr. Lomas-Coper. "Cheer-screamingly-ho, wuff, wuff!"

He pranced off in a realistically Wodehousian manner, and the girl smiled. Algy was the goods, under his superficial fatuousness, and even if he were not noticeably blessed with superfluous quantities of gray matter he was at least a very willing horse. In the miasma of dark suspicion which lay over most of the population of Baycombe, it was a relief to find a man who was too foolish to be dangerous and simple enough to be loyal. She had always suspected that Algy cherished a fluffy and sentimental affection for her—he would call at the Manor on romantically moonlit nights and try to make her stroll in the garden with him, and, on these occasions, unless she exerted herself to keep up an uninterrupted flow of idle impersonal chatter, he was wont to become inarticulate and calf-eyed. Now, if never before, she felt grateful for his incoherent adoration.

But with the departure of the effervescent and devoted Algy, and the intervention of a blank reign of tenterhooks before the next move could be made and the next rush of action and danger could sweep her up in its course, the leering black devils that had been pushed back out of sight for the time being came round her again, grinning and gibing to torment her. She could think of her man again, and with the clarity of a vision he seemed to stand before her. Her hands went out to him, and then he vanished, and at her feet, in the floor of the Pill Box, opened the square trap-door that she had seen in that room of the Old House. She started back, covering her eyes, and dropped into a chair. . . .

Resolutely she bent to the conquest of her mind. It was no use going to pieces—that would be fatal, when the reins of the adventure had come into her hands and victory or defeat must come under her leadership. To fail now would be an unforgivable treachery to the Saint: to succeed would be a last tribute to his memory.

And once again she achieved the mastery of herself. Taut and quivering like a bow drawn to the shaft in the hands of an archer, Patricia Holm sat in the Saint's chair with her head in her arms for a long time. The effort was as much physical as mental, and every muscle ached. There were hot unshed tears in her eyes, but they did not fall. "Soldiers' wives!" he had said to her, last thing before they parted, and she knew that that was the only heroic game to play.

She lost track of time. She must have sunk into a kind of trance, perhaps from sheer nervous weariness, for the sound of someone tiptoeing about the room roused her with a jar, and it seemed as if she had slept.

It was Orace, clad in an amazingly striped swimming suit, with a broad leather belt about his waist. From the belt his mammoth revolver dangled by a length of stout cord.

"Ain't that thunderin' flop-ears come back yet?" he demanded scornfully, seeing that the girl was awake. "Well 'ave ta go wivaht 'im—I spect 'e's lorst 'is bed-socks an' carn't find the 'otwaterbol. I'm orl ready when yer sy 'Go,' miss."

She was stunned to find that it was ten past eleven.

"Go and have another look," she said. "Go a little way down the hill and see if he's coming."

Orace went, as though he thought it was a waste of energy.

Patricia went out and looked down from the cliff edge again. Her calculation had been a good one. The tip of the moon had just peeped up over the rim of the sea, and that made the visibility an infinitesimal fraction of a candlepower better. In an hour or two there would be as much light as they wanted, and probably rather more. And the Tiger's motor ship was riding right under her eyes, quite easy to see now, about three cables' lengths off the island. Two black midgets, which she recognized as the ship's boats, were sculling toward the Old House; she could hear, very faintly, the almost imperceptible rattle of a smooth-running donkey engine. It was not for some time after that she observed a third boat cruising diagonally across the water toward the big ship. From its course she knew that it must have come from the direction of the quay.

Was that Carn, possibly supported by other detectives, ferrying out to catch the Tiger? If so, she was too late, and the law would have to deal with the Tiger after its own protracted and quibbling fashion. . . . But would Carn have been so foolish as to imagine that he could approach the Tiger like that without being spotted by the lookout on board? She knew that detectives were popularly judged by the standards of fiction, according to which all police officials have big feet and small intelligence, but she could hardly believe that even the flat-footed kind of oaf depicted by the novelist could be such a flabbergasting imbecile.

Suddenly she saw the solution. The Tiger was in Baycombe, but with the removal of his gold the reason for his stay was also taken away. That boat must have been sent over to fetch him. The Tiger was even then

being rowed out to his ship—the ship they were to capture.

Patricia drew a deep breath. Things were clearing up. All the widespread threads of the tangled web of mystery and terror that had cast its shadow so unexpectedly over her life and her home had been obligingly gathered up and dumped down in the few hundred square yards of shining water below. The gold was there; the Tiger was there; the Tiger Cubs were there. The gold was of secondary importance, and the Tiger Cubs, being nothing without their leader, were of no importance whatever except as a dangerous obstacle to be overcome. But the Tiger was the big prize in the Lucky Dip, and that was a gamble she was relentlessly determined to win. There would be no more mystery about his identity, once she was on board: he could only be one of two people. And then . . .

Orace loomed silently out of the dimness.

"Carn't see 'im," he said shortly, and with that he would have dismissed the subject of Mr. Lomas-Coper. "Owda we get dahn this plurry precipyse, Miss Patricia? I'd fergot—we ain't got no rope ter speak of 'ere."

"He was going to bring some," said the girl. "I wonder if anything's happened to him?"

She was at a loss to explain the defection of Algy. He had been so thrilled with the adventure that she could not believe that he would deliberately let her down, and she did not number cowardice among his failings. Had Bloem found out that she had enlisted Algy? The possibility of a spy listening outside the embrasure while she talked had not occurred to her,

and the thought sent her cold. If they *had* been overheard, the Tiger Cubs would be waiting for them, and their plan was foredoomed to failure—unless by some brilliant revision it could be brought to bear from another angle.

Then she had an inspiration. If Algy had been returning punctually, he would have passed by the quay about the time the boat she had seen was picking up the Tiger himself. Algy knew all the facts, and if he had noticed anything suspicious he would probably have stopped to investigate. Then, like the impetuous ass he was, he'd have managed to drop several large bricks. . . .

"They may have got him already," she said. "I've got a hunch what must have happened. We'll go down and see."

Already she was heading down the hill, and Orace followed protestingly.

" 'E ain't werf it, miss, onestter Gawd, 'e ain't."

"He's two more men than we can afford to lose," Patricia retorted crisply. "In any case, we've got to go this way. We must get some rope and see if Carn's back—I'd like to know that the police were going to chip in later, in case we don't bring it off."

The quay, so called by courtesy, was no more than fifty yards by ten of rough stone, littered with coils of rope, drying nets, lobster pots, and spars. Behind it were tarred wooden huts used by the fishermen to repair their things; and from one end of it a stone jetty ran out for no more than twenty yards.

They stopped and looked round.

From a very little distance came a slithering sound and a low groan. Then a weak whisper: "Pat!"

Orace had thoughtfully brought his torch, but the girl stopped him using it, aware that they could be seen from the ship if anyone happened to be looking that way. She traced the voice, and almost at once came upon the man lying against the wall of one of the huts.

"Is that you, Algy?"

"Right—first go," he got out. "I'm a washout—to get—pipped—bang off—like this!"

She was supporting his head with her arm, and Orace was hovering ineffectually around.

"How did they get you?" she asked. "Is it bad?"

"Think I'll pull—round—in a sec.," he muttered with an effort. "I'm not going to die—by a fluke."

At this news Orace, finding that he had not to play odd man out at a deathbed scene, moved the girl aside and picked Algy up. He carried him round behind the hut and then switched the torch on him. Blood was running down the side of Algy's face from an ugly furrow which was scored from the outside end of his eyebrow to the top of his ear, and there was a black cordite burn on his temple.

"Point-blank," he said. "It stunned me. But I'll soon be as fit as a fiddle."

Orace had found a bucket, and in this he fetched water from the sea. Algy heaved himself and plunged his head in the pail for three or four long douches, coming up for breath in between. The salt water stung his wound painfully, but his head was rapidly clearing.

While they tied a handkerchief round his head he told the story, and it was much as the girl had surmised.

"So, like a little hero," he concluded ruefully, "I walked up and said 'Hands up!' in the approved manner. And then I got this."

"Did you recognize anybody?"

"It was too dark to see their faces—I didn't even see the jolly old pea-shooter they used on me. But one of them was short and fat, which must have been the Sausage-meat Sultan, and I'm blowed if another hadn't got something doocid like the height and shape of Uncle Hans!"

"How many were there?"

"Three or four—they stood in a group, so I can't be quite certain."

He was struggling to his feet, and he stood leaning against the wall of the hut. The shock must have been worse than he admitted, for his face was white and drawn.

"How do you feel now?" she asked.

"Fine," he said. "I feel as if the top of my head's breaking off, but otherwise I'm absolutely O. K. Let's get along—the string's where I dropped it, round in front. Lead on!"

Orace had faded away to fetch the rope, and in a moment he returned with a heavy coil of it slung over his shoulder.

"Don't chew fink ya better go 'ome?" he asked. "Yer carn't be yupter much after this."

The honourable wound which Mr. Lomas-Coper had received in the Cause had immediately destroyed Orace's animosity toward him. In another second Orace would call him "sir."

"No, I don't," said Algy strongly, and roughly he shook off their hands. "I'm going through with this now. Blast it, those unmitigated blighters shot me up! I've jolly well *got* to meet them again, and I shall be fearfully vindictive about it. The cold water'll do me

no end of good, and by the time we're aboard the lugger I'll be ready for anything."

"Well, I'm glad jer not worse 'urt, sir," said Orace in a tone of encouragement. "But if I might jus' take yerrarm while yer gettin' yer bref, so ter speak. . . ."

The girl also was not unwilling to let Algy have his own way: in the grimness of her purpose she was as incapable of sparing anyone else as she was of sparing herself.

"But we ought to get Carn," she said.

"I went to look for the sleuth just before I started back," Algy answered. "He hasn't returned. We'll have to do without him."

The hope of legal reënforcements seemed to be receding, thought Patricia, as they set off toward the Pill Box. It appeared that she had been mistaken about Carn's knowledge, for if he had been planning to make his coup that night he must have been on the spot by that time. And, since he was not, the management of the bunfight was left entirely to the three of them.

In the Pill Box it was Algy who decided that the safest way to fix their rope was to pass it round a section of the wall, by way of two embrasures, tying it on the outside; though the actual work was left to Orace, as a man with some nautical experience. A change had come over Algy, sobering down his bubbling vapidness and turning him into a sensible man. It had been done by the bullet which had so nearly smashed him out of the adventure altogether—the fool had been stung by a hard fact, and it had brought out into the open the character which for years he had taken such pains to conceal. Automatically he rose from

the ranks to a commission, with Pat as his only superior: Orace accepted the transformation philosophically.

They paid out the rope hand over hand, prone on the turf (by Orace's advice) so as not to be visible from below, for the moonlight was strengthening. The rope itself ran down in a kind of big groove in the rock, so that as they descended they would be almost hidden in the shadow.

"It should be long enough," said Algy. "I allowed plenty." He was peeling off his raincoat, and stood in bathing costume like the other two. "Who goes first?"

"Final orders," said Patricia—"tuck the artillery up in your belts and mind it doesn't clank against the rock; don't make one millionth of a splash swimming; and don't talk—you know how sound travels over water. Now, good luck to everyone! Follow your leader. . . ."

Before either of the men could stop her she had twisted over the edge with the rope in her hands, and was sliding down, bracing herself off the cliff wall with her feet.

She was strong and without fear, and the rope was longer than it need have been. She still had hold of it when her feet grounded on the pebbly beach with the water lapping round her knees.

She stepped back and waved her arm.

Algy stood beside her in a minute, and Orace joined them after a similar interval. Without a word they waded in and pushed off. All three were strong swimmers, but one of them had a dud leg and another was still recovering from the effects of that glancing bullet across his skull. Before them lay two miles of sea, and at the end of it a desperately daring hazard.

The water was ideally calm and not too chilly for the distance. Patricia, who was like a fish in the water, hung a length behind the others, so that she could see if either of them crocked up. She turned over on her side and nestled her ear into the water, ploughing on with long, easy, noiseless strokes.

At that particular moment Mr. Central Detective Inspector Carn and his posse were plodding wearily through the darkness toward Baycombe, their car having broken down with twelve miles still to go, and the prospects of getting a lift on that lonely road, at that hour of the night, being exactly nil.

Chapter XVI

IN THE SWIM

TO FALL one hundred and sixty feet takes just a shade over three seconds, but it seems a lot longer. Simon Templar knew this very vividly, for he seemed to live through three æons between the instant of sickening breathlessness when he felt the cut-away flooring giving way under his weight, through the four odd pulse-beats of hurtling down and down into darkness, till he struck water with a stinging splash.

He sank like a plummet, and struck out mightily for the surface. He must have gone deep, for by the time his head came up his heart was pounding furiously and his chest felt as if it were about to cave in under the pressure. He drew a giant's breath, and choked at the end of it, for, unsuspecting, he had let himself be sucked under again. The undertow was terrific. He kicked out with all his strength, and as he rose again, gasping and spitting, his hand touched stone and got a grip on it instinctively. In spite of his experience, he still misjudged the power of the current: his hold was all but broken as soon as he obtained it, and his arm was nearly jerked from its socket with the strain. With an exertion of every bit of force he could rally, he drew himself up with his shoulder muscles, thrashing the water with his legs, until he got the fingers of his other

hand crooked over that providential ledge. There he hung, panting, with the sinews of his arms taut and creaking, while he shook the water out of his eyes and tried to get his bearings.

Already he had been swept some distance from where he had fallen—it must have been a longish way, reckoning by the force of the stream as measured by the pull on his arms. The blackness was not complete, fortunately. His eyes were already used to the darkness, and so he was able to take in the surroundings comparatively well by the faint phosphorescent light which filtered up, apparently, from the surface of the water.

He had been dropped into some sort of subterranean river. His handhold was a rough projection in the rock wall of the cavern through which the stream ran. The cave was no more than a dozen feet wide, but the vaulted roof arched over a good twenty-five feet from the surface: during the centuries of its mill-race career the river must have worn itself deeper and deeper into its bed. "Mill-race" was a good description. The superficial smoothness of the water was no guide to the murderous speed and power of the current. The Saint wondered what beneficent deity had placed that shelf of rock directly under his flailing hand, for without it he would undoubtedly have been dragged down and drowned in a few minutes. Even now he wasn't out of the wood: the agonizing twinges of overworked muscle were throbbing up and down his arms, and though he had fingers of steel they wouldn't stand up to that gruelling tension indefinitely.

Clearly the great thing was to slip the clutch of the torrent which was patiently struggling to pluck him away and haul him down to the death which had been

arranged for him. The Saint pulled himself up a few inches to test his muscles, and groaned, for he had been weakening faster than he realized. He let himself down again for a second's rest and set his teeth. Perhaps he prayed. . . . Then he took and held a deep breath, and heaved again. He edged up six inches . . . seven . . . eight. . . . There he stopped to breathe again. Even that slight drawing of his body from the clasp of the rushing water lessened the stress, and he tackled the next effort with a better heart. This time he brought his chin over the ledge, and one of his feet, scrabbling for help against the submerged face of the rock, lodged in a cranny and enabled him to get enough support from his legs partially to relax his arms and hands while he gathered strength for a final spurt.

He looked up, wondering now whether this strenuous climbing was only going to lead to a postponement of the end—to a cramped and painful clinging to the stone until his endurance petered out and he slipped and fell again into those evil waters. And then he had difficulty in stopping himself wasting precious energy in a resounding cheer, for he saw a wide black opening in the rock some ten feet over his head. That was certainly a recess where he could lie down and rest almost indefinitely. It seemed as if the kind gods were giving him all the breaks that afternoon.

"Not yet, my Tiger, not yet," muttered the Saint, with all his old indomitable jauntiness flooding back. "Shoals of people have sweated like Harry to bump me off, but I'm beginning to think it can't be done!"

The sight of that prospective refuge was enormously encouraging, and he felt new reserves of strength

tingle into his body. He shifted his grip to another narrow angle of rock at arm's length overhead, and with a long pull he managed to hitch himself right out of the water and get his toes on to the ledge which had saved his life, while his hands moved up from crevice to crevice in the stone; so that when he paused again he was standing straight up, flattened out against the rock, with the river slinking past clear beneath him.

The opening he had seen was temptingly near now, and in his eagerness he nearly overreached himself. He flung his weight on to a jutting bit of rock without first testing it, and it broke away in his hand. He was left swinging by three fingers of his left hand in a hold barely an inch deep, and it was several nerve-racking and muscle-racking seconds before he found fresh holds. Thereafter he proceeded with more circumspection, and eventually scrambled over the rim of the ledge he had marked down with no further mishap.

He stretched himself out on his back and closed his eyes. Now that the immediate peril was past, reaction came. In the ordinary way his nerves were faultless, but perhaps the prefatory shock of the fall, followed by the awful sensation of being swirled helplessly down into the depths of the underground river, had between them succeeded in undermining some of his confidence. He felt utterly weary, and he was shaking in every limb—though this could have been largely due to the reaction of relaxing muscles and tendons. It was some time before he was able to roll over on his side and peer down at the treacherous, glimmering sheen of smooth water a dozen feet below. Unenviable as his position still was, the Saint contrived a twisted grin.

"Rotten luck, son," he croaked. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't want to die to-day."

Then, in the nebulous light which permeated the clammy atmosphere, he turned to examine the possibilities of further progress. He had heard of such caverns as this, and knew that parts of the country were honeycombed with a vast network of such subterranean natural excavations. Some of these caves went further than even the most intrepid had ever dared to explore them: he remembered a story he had heard about Cheddar Caves, of a party which had set out to investigate a certain tunnel and had never returned, and he recalled how his fertile imagination had been fired with visionings of strange prehistoric beasts surviving in the bowels of the earth, and perhaps a race of semi-human beings similarly entombed, and how he had resolved one day to go in search of the lost explorers. But that would have been with all the armoury he wanted, suitable companions, ropes, and torches. . . . This, however, was not Cheddar, and he had nothing but his soaking clothes and the few things in his pockets. Yet, since there was no retreat toward the water, he must go the other way. He was certain that he had been carried too far down the stream for there to be any hope of a search party getting in touch with him.

Behind him what he had thought was simply the ledge proved to be a low gap in the face of the rock. He crawled a little way in, and felt again the helplessness of being without the flashlight which he ought to have had with him in any case. Still, it wasn't any use crying about it—you couldn't weep luminous tears—so the only thing to do was to carry on and hope for the best.

A distinct draught chilled his face as he wriggled along in the pitchy blackness, and his hopes began to rise again, tentatively. If the air circulated freely, it meant that somewhere there must be an outlet, and the grim doubt was whether, when he found it, it would prove to be an outlet he could use.

It was a vague sort of consolation to find that his wrist watch, which was guaranteed to stand any amount of rough handling on land or sea or air, had stood up to this last test. It was still ticking smoothly, and he could time his laborious progress by the luminous dial. The floor of the tunnel seemed to be practically level, and long-forgotten eroding waters had worn it flat and eaten the jaggedness off the irregularities which had survived, so that worming along on his stomach was not so arduous as it might have been. Once he cracked his head against a wall of rock right in his path, and so found that the passage took a twist to the right. After that, he felt his way gingerly, and thus circumnavigated the subsequent windings uninjured. Always he made sure that the air blew on his face, and by that means he saved himself the expenditure of much time and energy on following up a side branch which must have been a blind alley. He went on like this for over an hour, and at the end of that time, raising himself slowly to his feet, he found that the roof had receded far enough to allow him to proceed upright, which was an improvement.

Still he felt his way forward very carefully with feet and hands, for he had no desire to step over the edge of a small precipice or run his head against a sudden dip of the rock above. He kept one hand on the wall to steer by and worked patiently on.

The darkness had that pitchy intensity which torments the eyes and rasps the nerves to a shrieking rawness. He understood then as never before the full agony of blindness. Queer flashes of crimson rocketed across his sight, and the strain of transferring all his reliance to his sense of touch was working him up into a quivering torment of fraying ganglions. There was a terrible desire to sink down on the stone and crawl aimlessly about till sleep and forgetfulness came. Then this was replaced by the struggling of a childish terror to unthrone his reason and set him pounding helpless fists against the rock—to rush madly into the blackness till he crashed against another wall and was flung broken and screaming to the ground—to give up the attempt altogether and stand raving and cursing this false blindness, praying recklessly for the relief of death. For all the darkness that cloaks the world under the sky is as dazzling sunshine to the awful numbing terror of the darkness in the places under the earth where there has never been light since the beginning.

But the Saint slogged on, though toward the end he scarcely knew what he was doing, and his pace grew slower and slower, jerky and automatic, till it stopped altogether. Then he would drive himself forward again. Then he would find that he had come to a standstill again, and the routine would be repeated. Wild snatches of all the songs he had ever heard burst from his dry lips and boomed and reëchoed crazily about his ears. Once he was deafened with a harsh roar of eerie, discordant laughter, and was only half conscious that it cackled from his own throat. He found that he chattered and babbled foolish, meaningless strings of words, and here and there in his madness sentences

from widely separated conversations stood out with ridiculous clarity in the senseless jumble. And each time he caught himself giving way to these forerunners of insanity he stopped and lashed himself back to trembling silence. He grew careless of his safety. Sometimes he ran as though fiends pursued him; then he would crash against an obstacle and fall headlong, and there he would lie and wrestle with himself till he could rise and go on again. He reeled and thudded against the wall, and went on—he stumbled and tripped and fell, and went on—he was aching with a hundred bruises, but still he went on . . . on . . . on. . . . Sometimes he blasphemed, sometimes he prayed. But yard by yard he advanced; and always, high and safe above the maelstrom of breaking nerves, he had before him the one guiding beacon which could possibly bring him out of that hell alive—to fight on and on and keep that draught of clean, fresh air blowing squarely in his face.

The strength of an unfaltering will to live drove him on when tearing muscles cried for rest. He could no longer see his watch: when he tried to look at it, the figures and the hands whirled and jazzed before his eyes in a dizzy tangle which he had lost the power to control. But hours had ceased to mean anything—in that Stygian emptiness there was no time, no anything but pain and madness. Always there was that impenetrable darkness, clinging, pulsating, palpable. It wound sinuously about his limbs and tried to hold them—it looped a noose round his chest and tightened it—it thudded on his temples and seared his eyes—swelled in upon him till he seemed to be ploughing through a tenuous liquid, and yet when he hit out and strove to

break away from its grip it thinned away and let him go, only to swathe him round again in an instant. It stuck in his throat like a fog, curling ghostly, evil fingers caressingly about his face. He thought of Light, Light, Light—of glowing coals and the leaping flicker of campfires, of the pale, mystical light of the moon and the dim, dusty light of stars, of searchlight beams and the headlights of cars, of the sizzling white glare of arc lamps. He thought of all great lights—of the merciless blaze of eye-aching tropical suns flaming over amethyst desert skies. But there was only the darkness. . . . And he toiled on. . . .

And then ahead of him was no longer darkness.

He had turned a corner of the passage, staggering round a buttress and falling heavily over a boulder which he saw but had not the strength to avoid. And as he lay on the ground, sore and weary to death, he saw that the rock about him was picked out with the faintest of faint silver lights. He wondered if this were madness at last—if his eyes had been won over to the Enemy and were joining in the derision of his defeat—if his vision had been seduced to refining his torture with hallucinations of victory. Slowly, fearfully, he raised his head.

He could see all the cave in which he lay—the height and the length and the breadth of it. The light was so dim that it hardly amounted to more than normal darkness, but after the appalling blind blackness in which he had wandered for so many hours it was as startling a contrast as the rising of the sun after night. Almost sobbing with thankfulness, he dragged himself to his

feet and went reeling on. There was another bend about fifty yards ahead, and at that corner it seemed as if the light was a little stronger. He reached the angle of rock and stumbled around it in a torment of apprehension lest after all he should have been deceived. But before him lay a short stretch of widening cave, and at the end of that showed a great rough-hewn opening. And through that opening he saw the blessed sky—an infinitely deep and clean blue evening sky sprinkled with merry, winking stars.

Somehow he reached the opening and saw all the glory of the radiant night, the jewelled heavens above and the quiet sea below. He stood and gazed, supremely happy, marvelling at all these things as a man might do who had seen none of them before and would see none of them again.

"Oh, God!" said the Saint in a breathless whisper.

Then he sagged limply against the wall and slid down to the ground in a dead faint.

It was three hours before he opened his eyes again, though this the Saint did not know. He had fallen in the entrance of the cave, and he was awakened by the light of the rising moon shining across his face. Slowly he opened his eyes and gazed unwinkingly into the round white luminous disk that was heaving itself out of the sea. A memory of the nightmare of blindness through which he had passed seethed horribly across his half-consciousness, and he sprang up with a cry. The movement roused him completely, and he found himself leaning against the wall with his heart thudding like a triphammer and his breath coming in short

gasps. He smiled crookedly, collecting himself. He must have had it badly! Never before had he passed out like that.

He waited, gathering his wits and trampling the aftermath of the nightmare. It was then that he looked at his watch and found that it was half-past eleven. The rest had revived him—the crazy muzziness had gone from his head, and he felt his strength welling back in great refreshing waves. Elbows and knees were grazed and sore, his knuckles were skinned, tender bumps were coming up all over his skull, and his entire body throbbed like one big bruise, but this was where his strenuous training stood him in good stead: so great were the recuperative powers of his matchless constitution that already he was stretching his limbs experimentally to see whether he could honestly certify himself fit and tuned up for the next round.

And gradually the awareness of a singular noise began to percolate his brain, and that noise was the faint, clanking, chugging noise of machinery. He stiffened, and turned his head. The sound faded away into silence, and he wondered if his ears were playing him tricks and he was hearing nothing but the singing of his own battered cranium. Then that gentle rattling started up again—only the muffled phantom of a bated whisper of a noise, but quite unmistakable to the Saint.

He looked out, and blinked incredulously.

The island called the Old House lay in the quiet sea below. A little farther out a long, lean, black shape rode at anchor, picked out in delicately stippled high lights where the moon touched it—a picture to rejoice the heart of an artist or a seaman. And presently, while Simon watched, the tinkle of the engine stopped again.

In a moment a small boat shot out from under the shadow of the ship's hull and began to pull swiftly over to the island; and at the same time another boat emerged from behind the Old House and worked over toward the motor ship. The boat which came from the island wallowed low in the water and moved sluggishly; the Saint could see a squat pile of crates loaded amidships. The night was so still that his keen hearing could even detect the faint jar of the rowlocks.

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated the Saint mildly.

The inconceivable good luck which had stood by him throughout his lawless career, and which had been prodigiously attentive to him in this adventure, was still working overtime. There he was, alive and more or less well, when he ought by rights to have been drowned in the underground stream or lost in the interminable blackness of the caves—and no sooner had his little guiding star picked him out of that mess, and given him a few minutes to get his wind, than he was handed out this incredible gift! It seemed to him that he was streets ahead of the mortal for whom mere manna falls from heaven: to the Saint, for no reason that he could cudgel out of his brains, Heaven seemed to spend all its spare time dispatching perfectly cooked eight-course dinners with a selection of appropriate wines complete, what time he did nothing more than providing the silver and cutlery. His gods had landed him up in pretty good order at exactly the place where he wanted to be, at exactly the hour he wanted to arrive, and had thoughtfully thrown in the fact that by then the Tiger would be working his gang overtime patting himself on the back for having so slickly annihilated

the thorn which for so long had been playing the devil with their ugly hides!

That was certainly an unhoped-for blessing. The Tiger thought Mr. Templar was dead. Well, Mr. Templar decided to let the Tiger cherish that harmless little delusion for a space. Being theoretically dead, the Saint was going to stay dead till it suited his book to stage a resurrection.

There were, of course, contrary considerations. By that time Orace and Pat and Carn would have turned Baycombe inside out, and they would have found only that gaping hole in the floor of the inn. Wherefore at least two of that party, and one of them especially, would be—— But that had got to stand aside. They'd have presumed him dead for some hours now, and it would only mean delaying the homecoming a few more hours. Against that he could set the help it gave him to know that Patricia would be safely out of the fireworks, though he would feel the absence of Orace. All the same, taking it by and large, he reckoned that debit and credit weren't so far off balancing. With a continuance of his miraculous luck, the curtain could be rung down a lot sooner, now that everything was arranged for him to catch the Tiger on the hop. . . .

"The Saint *versus* the Tiger," murmured Simon. "This is where all the early Christian martyrs will look down from heaven and see the old game played under rules they'd never heard of in Rome—and, we hope, with a surprise ending that Nero never saw."

It was the Saint himself who spoke. All his bubbling optimism was sparkling up through his system again. He was tired, naturally, but he still felt fit enough to tackle anything the Tiger Cubs were prepared to hand

out to him, and he had never reviewed an impending struggle more eagerly, for by all the omens it was going to be the last of his exploits, and his sense of theatre demanded that he should finish up in a blaze of glory.

He searched for his weapons, and found them securely in their places. The cigarettes in his case, which might have been useful, had been ruined by the wet; but the case itself, with the fine steel blade running along one edge of it, was a tried asset in emergencies, and this went into the hip pocket of his trousers. His coat he left in the cave.

Looking down, he saw that there were only a dozen yards to climb down to the beach. With the moon to help him, this was no difficult task. He swung over the edge at once, and in a few minutes he stood on the crunching shingle with the water lapping round his ankles. There was a longish swim yet to get through, but by now he felt capable of all that and more. He waded out up to his waist and then slithered forward into the ripples without a splash, like an otter, and struck out for the Tiger's ship with clean, powerful strokes.

His arms rose and fell rhythmically, making not the least sound as they cleared the water and then dived back at full stretch. The Saint could keep up that graceful overarm for hours, but on this occasion he had no need for such a display of stamina. His trained muscles drove him forward tirelessly at a pace that ate up distance. He steered a wide circling course to keep well out of the danger zone between the Old House and the ship, where he might have been spotted by a pair of keen eyes in one of the rowboats or by anyone who happened to be looking across that reach of water

from either side, for the moonlight was strengthening with every minute—an act of cussedness on the part of Nature which made the job in hand a more ticklish proposition for both Saint and Tiger alike. Even so, it was not very long before he came up under the motor ship's cruiser stern, after covering the last hundred yards under water with only three cautious floatings-up for breath.

He clung there for a moment's rest, and then worked his way along the seaward side, where it would be safest, forward to the bows, hugging close in to the hull. It then occurred to him that the climb up the anchor chain, in full view of the island and the ship's bridge, would be a very chancy method. Yet the vessel's sides rose sheer and unbroken for six feet before they were cut by the lowest row of portholes.

But once more his luck held. As he swam slowly along, pondering this problem, he ran right into a rope ladder which hung down from the deck. It couldn't have been more conveniently provided if he had asked for it to be lowered against his arrival, but a little thought gave him the reason for its presence. It must have been dropped for the Tiger and his principals to come aboard, and since then the tide must have swung the ship right round on her moorings. And there it was, temporarily forgotten, and just the very thing he wanted.

The noise of the donkey engine, throttled down though it was, and the creaking of the derricks which were taking the gold on board, was louder now, and he could hear the sound of sea boots grating on the deck, and the subdued voices of men. As far as he could

gather on his way up they were working on the after hold, for he heard nothing from directly above him.

The Saint came level with the deck and peeped over. All was clear at that point and forward of it, but he could see a few figures clustered round the small hatch aft, and an arm of timber stood out against the sky with a square case dangling at the end of it. Fortunately, they were all intent on their task, and already he had banked on the ship being short-handed, so that all the crew there was would be occupied with other things than loafing about getting in his way. With a quick heave, the Saint gained the rail, went over, and landed on the deck without sound. Facing him was an open door and a companionway. He jumped for it.

On the first step he paused and listened, but the work was going steadily on, and clearly nobody had noticed the dripping dark shape that had slipped over the rail and leaped across the exposed bit of deck.

"So far, so very good!" said the Saint, and a smile of joyous anticipation flitted across his lips. "Once aboard the lugger and the gold is mine!"

The companion ran down into a dimly lighted alleyway, and there the Saint hesitated. That was a risky place to loiter in. Cabins were also risky—they needed only the turning of a key to turn them into prisons. But he wanted a few seconds to rest and plan the next move, and had to take his chance.

There was a promising-looking door right opposite him, and he tiptoed across the alley and turned the handle very softly. But the door must have been locked, for his gently increasing pressure failed to make it budge. The Saint was promptly intrigued by that locked door. It immediately drove all thoughts of safety and rest

and scheming out of his head, and in his reckless fashion he resolved to have a look inside that cabin with the least possible delay, whether it was occupied or not—and, listening with his ear to a panel, he came to the conclusion that the unbroken silence within laid more than a shade of odds on its being empty. But to open a locked door required more implements than he had on him, and he was about to go in search of the engine-room workshop to collect suitable apparatus when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

In a flash he located their origin—round the nearest corner of the passage. The Saint retreated a little way up his companion ladder—an unwise move, since it left him with a very groggy line of withdrawal if the man glimpsed him and raised the alarm; but Simon, ever an opportunist, was curious to see who it was that had time to spend below when all hands were toiling to get the cargo loaded in the shortest practicable time.

He peeped one eye round the angle of the bulkhead, and then drew back sharply.

It was Bloem, carrying a tray on which was a plate with a pile of sandwiches and a siphon. The Saint glanced back over his shoulder, but behind him the deck was still deserted, though he was in imminent danger of discovery by anyone who happened to pass and glance down. For an instant he meditated flight—but only for an instant. The deck would be an unhealthy place for Simon Templar to wander around just then, and, besides, there was the door to open and Bloem to tail up in case the Boer were bringing the Tiger a little supper.

The Saint flattened himself against the bulkhead; and, as the footsteps drew level with him, he tensed up ready to take instant action if Bloem noticed him.

But the Boer was already turning away when he came into view, and Simon's eyes fired up as he saw that Bloem was making for the locked door.

Bloem set the tray down on the floor, fumbled for a key, and turned it in the lock. He pushed the door half open, and the Saint could see one corner of the cabin, for the lights were on inside. Then Bloem bent down to pick up the tray, and as he did so Simon dived from the eighth stair.

The Saint landed on one hunched shoulder, and that shoulder impinged accurately over Bloem's kidneys. The man gave a grunt of agony. All the weight of Simon's leaping, falling body was hurtling on behind that muscular shoulder, and Bloem was caught off his equilibrium. The impact sent the Boer toppling over, and his head was bumped forcefully against the floor as Simon crashed on top of him.

Bloem was absolutely out, but the sound of the scuffle might possibly have been heard. The Saint was on his feet again with the speed of a fighting panther. He grabbed Bloem by the collar and yanked him into the cabin; then he snatched in the tray. In a moment he had the door shut and had turned with his back to it to see what his impulse had let him in for.

It was not till then that he saw someone sitting quietly on the bunk.

"Oh, how d'you do, Auntie?" said the Saint, who was always polite, and Agatha Girton's lips curved ironically.

"You're really rather a wonderful man, Mr. Templar," she remarked.

Chapter XVII

PIRACY

COMING from the opposite side of the tor to that of the Saint's take-off, Patricia and her two lieutenants had no need to make a detour. They approached the Tiger's ship on the sheltered side. The hull of it cast a deep and spacious shadow over the moonlit waters, and all the attention of the crew would be concentrated toward the island and away from the swimmers, so that the only precautions the raiders had to observe were those of slipping through the quiet sea without noise.

When the sides of the ship loomed above them, Patricia forged ahead and led the way up under the bows. There they rested for a moment, clinging with cramped fingers to the edges of the plates, while their leader reconnoitred.

She swam back a little way to get a clear view of the anchor chain, and saw the same disadvantages in that line of attack as the Saint himself had envisaged. Then, being the freshest of the trio after the swim, she moved along the side to prospect for an alternative route. Thus she discovered the rope ladder which the Saint had used, and returned to inform the others of their good fortune. They followed her back—Orace was plugging doggedly on, but Algy was in great distress, and had held them back considerably in the last quarter

mile—and the girl caught the lower rungs and pulled herself out of the water.

"Half a lap more, and then we can rest," she encouraged in a whisper, leaning down and pressing Algy's hand. "Try to raise just an ounce more—we've got to move fast till we find some place to hide."

She scaled the ladder with a nimbleness that no old salt could have bettered, and the straining of the ropes in her hands told her that the others were trailing her as actively as they could. Looking before she leaped, she saw that the only men visible were intent upon steering an instalment of their precious cargo down into the hold aft, and in a trice she had flashed over the rail and was standing in the shadow of the deck-house. In a moment Algy's head topped the rail, and she beckoned him to hurry. Somehow he clambered over and got across the deck to join her, though he was dazed and swaying with cold and fatigue. Orace came hard on his heels.

"How are we all?" asked Pat.

Orace was trying to rub some of the wet off his arms and legs.

"Orl right, miss—me ole woon's painin' a bit, but nuffin' ta speak uv."

"Algy?"

"F-f-frightfully sorry to b-be such a n-n-nuisance, old th-thing!" Algy's teeth were chattering like castanets. "But I'll b-b-be all right in a b-bally jiffy. I wish we could f-f-find the Tiger's whisky!"

The girl turned to Orace.

"Will you take charge for a minute?" she said. "I don't know enough about ships. Take us some place where we'll be fairly safe from being spotted."

" 'Um," said Orace, and scratched his chin thoughtfully. " 'Tain't sa thunderin' easy, onner tub this size. . . . I'll goan seef they've gotta fo'c'sle-'atch, f'ya don' min' settin' among the 'awsers."

She nodded.

"Carry on—and be quick."

She waited, supporting Algy with one arm. She kept a sharp lookout, and her disengaged hand held Bloem's automatic, for they could not fail to be seen if anyone passed along that side of the deck. In which case the adventure was likely to terminate without further parley. . . . But luck was with them, and no one came, though they could hear the low voices of the men working aft, the thrum and groan of ropes and blocks and derricks, and the hum and clatter of the small winch. In a very brief space of time she saw Orace slinking back in the shadows.

"What luck?" she demanded softly.

"Didden think they'd 'ave wun," he replied—"but they yav! This wy——"

He led them swiftly to the bows, keeping well down in the lee of the rail. In a short distance they were able to crouch under the bulwarks at the fo'c'sle head.

Orace turned back the tarpaulin and raised the hatch. He shone his torch down to show them the tiny compartment almost filled with coils of hawser.

" 'Tain't much," said Orace apologetically, "but it's syfe fra bit."

They got Algy down, and Patricia followed. Orace squeezed in last, and pulled the tarpaulin over again as he lowered the hatch, so that at a casual glance it would not appear to have been tampered with.

"Cosy enough 'ere," said Orace, switching on his

lamp for a moment. "Ain't much air, though, an' if ennyone spots the 'atchis undid an' battens it dahn we shall sufficate in an owrer two," he added cheerfully. "We mighter done wuss, on the 'ole. But wot's nex' on the mean-you, Miss Patricia?"

"How's Algy?"

Orace focussed the light. Where Mr. Lomas-Coper was not ashen pale he was blue, but apparently his wound had closed up in the salt water, for the bandage round his head was clean. He grinned feebly.

"I'm rather weak, but I'll be lots better when I've warmed up. I'm afraid I'm not much use as a pirate, Pat—it's this blinkin' whang on the nut that's done me in."

The girl curled up against the bulkhead to give him as much room as possible to stretch out and rest.

"Orace and I will have to go out scouting in relays till you're better," she said. "We've got to find out where all the Tiger Cubs are before we move—I don't suppose there'll be many aboard, but we've got to locate them all and arrange to deal with them in batches so that the rest won't know what's happening. Then there are those men you saw on the quay. Bloem and Bittle will be here, and the Tiger—they're the most important and the most dangerous, and we can't afford to make any mistake about them."

"I'm fer tykin' the single ones as we meet 'em," said Orace. "I'll go fust—startin' naow. An' when I git me 'ands on ennyer them blankety-blanks they'll wish they'd never bin borned. I gotta naccount ter settle wiv this bunch o' fatherless scum."

"I've also got an account to settle," remarked Patricia quietly. "So I think I'll go first."

Orace was not a man to waste time on argument; he was also something of a strategist.

"We'll go tergether," he compromised. "I won't innerfere, but I'll be a pairer vize in the backa yer 'ed. Mr. Lomas-Coper won't 'urt 'ere alonely, will yer, sir?"

"Don't mind me, old sprout," urged Algy. "I'll tool along an' chip in as soon as I can—an' I hope you'll have left the bounder who pipped me for me to clean up."

There was really no reason for anyone staying with him, and Patricia agreed to Orace's suggestion.

They crawled out and replaced the hatch and tarpaulin cover as they had found it. Then, as they hesitated under cover of the bulwarks, Orace said:

"Mr. Templar 'ud be right—they'll be thunderin' short'anded. Seemster me, there won't be no more thanna nengineer below, an' p'r'aps a cook in the galley. These motor ships is that luck-shurious yer don' 'avta be offended by more'n a nanful o' vulgar seamen. Assoomin' that, jer finkyer c'u'd l'y aht the pertaterstoor wile I dots the metchanic one? I wouldn't letcha go alone, 'cept I knows be ixperience that pertaterstoors ain't like ord'n'ry men."

"I'll manage all right," Patricia assured him. "Hurry up about it, and I'll meet you under that awning in front of the saloon. Then we can arrange to tackle the men who're loading the gold."

"Righ-char, miss. . . . Remember that companion opposyte where we come over the side? Go dahn—yer mos' likely ter find the galley aft."

Orace accompanied her as far as the top of the companion, and there they separated. He had unostenta-

tiously bagged the most ticklish job in the programme for himself; for he had already located the engine-room companion aft of the hatch where the Tiger Cubs were working, and to reach it unobserved he would have to travel most of the way hanging over the side of the ship by his fingers, returning by the same method. But this fact he did not consider it his duty to disclose.

As soon as the girl had disappeared, he climbed over the rail and let himself down out of sight. In his younger days, Orace had been able to awe recruits with displays of gymnastic prowess, and he had not yet lost the knack. He worked swiftly and smoothly along the side, and did not halt until his ears told him that he was level with the after hatch. There he paused and edged himself up till he could peep over the coaming. He saw a crate go rattling down into the hold, and then someone unseen said something, and one of the men went to the starboard rail.

"Wot's 'e sy?" queried the man at the winch.

The man at the rail passed on the inquiry, and presently was able to answer it.

"Ses three more journeys'll finish it."

"Tell 'im ter 'urry 'em all along. The Old Man's frettin' ter get orf."

The command was duly relayed, and the man at the winch spat on his hand and sent the cable swishing down for a second load.

Orace let himself down to arm's length again and went on. The Tiger Cubs were working quicker than they had anticipated, and three more journeys, with at least two, if not three, of the ship's boats on the job, wouldn't take such a long time. It was not an occasion for dawdling.

Orace got well round to the stern and put a large ventilating cowl between himself and the men at the hatch before he ventured to return to the deck. Then he made a quick dash for the engine-room companion, and reached it unnoticed.

It is difficult to move silently over iron gratings, but Orace's bare feet enabled him to go down unobserved until there was only a short ladder to descend before he reached the level of the motors. There was only one man below, and he was bending over, tinkering with a bearing. Orace had got that far before the man straightened up to look for a spanner, and in so doing discovered his peril. The engineer let out a shout which reverberated deafeningly in the confined space, but which would have been hardly audible outside, and rushed.

As he came on he wrestled with his pocket, where his gun must have got stuck. That fluke gave Orace all the respite he needed, and saved him having to shoot. He jumped, and his feet struck the engineer full in the chest. The two went down together, but the engineer's body broke Orace's fall, and the head which in a few seconds was pounded into insensibility against a cylinder block was not Orace's. . . .

Orace was about to leave—was, in fact, already climbing—when he had an inspiration, and returned. The stunned mechanic was of Orace's own build. Orace commandeered the man's cap and blue jeans, and, finding a convenient locker, pushed the engineer into it and turned the key. Thus equipped, Orace felt that he had a decided advantage—he would be able to move more freely about the ship, and, if he encountered any Tiger Cubs, he would be safe from challenge in the darkness until he had got close enough to make his distaste for

their society effectively evident. Once more he began to make his way to the deck.

He was halfway there when he heard the tramp of heavy feet coming toward him. Orace turned and scuttled back. He kept his head averted and bent low over the nearest motor. The feet grated on the companion above him, and halted.

"All right down there, Joseph?"

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Orace in a muffled voice, without looking up.

"We'll be off in less than an hour. You needn't bother about running on the electric motors going out—we want to get off as quickly as we can."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I'll ring down as soon as the last load's being taken in, and you can start up then and keep running till we go."

The footsteps retired along the deck overhead, and Orace breathed again.

He had noticed the iron door behind him, but had assumed that it led only to the fuel tanks. As a matter of fact, it did, but there was also a narrow alley running between the tanks and continuing forward till it reached the foot of an emergency companion. He heard the slight click of the door opening, and quickly bowed his head over the engines again.

This man did not speak; but Orace, apparently intent on inspecting a spark plug, could hear the stealthy slither of feet over the greasy metal, and the hairs in the scruff of his neck prickled. There was something sinister about that wary approach—the man behind him moved so silently that Orace would never have noticed the sound if he had not been expecting it. The

door itself had been unlatched so cautiously that that noise also would probably have escaped him if he had not been listening for the retreat of the man who had spoken to him.

The stealthy feet drew nearer, step by step, while Orace kept his back turned and went on poring over the plug terminals. They were nearer now—only a couple of yards behind him, as far as he could judge. Another yard, and Orace gathered himself for a sudden movement. He had ceased to wonder whether the intruder regarded him as an innocent party. For some reason which he could not immediately divine Orace was suspect.

Some premonition, the prompting of a sixth sense, made him swing aside in the nick of time, and the smashing blow that had been aimed at his head whizzed past his ear and clanged on the engine casing. Orace whirled and leaped, but his feet slipped on the oily grating, and he sprawled headlong. His blunderbuss was underneath the borrowed overalls, and he had no time to fumble for it before his opponent had pounced on him and caught his throat in a deadly grip.

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Except the thrill of a sporting burglary—such as a raid upon the home of a famous detective with the said detective in residence and, for preference, entertaining a select party of his fellow sleuths—there is no thrill to be compared to the thrill of a refined form of piracy.

So Patricia realized as she stole down the dimly lighted alleyway aft in search of the galley. There she was, on the Tiger's ship, with only two assistants, one of whom was temporarily *hors de combat,* and the odds against them were five to one, at a conservative esti-

mate. The very forlornness of the adventure took away half its terrors, for with everything to lose—and as good as lost at the first slip—there was nothing to gain by footling and fiddling over the job. The only earthly chance of success was to blind recklessly ahead and chance the consequences. To funk the bold game would be fatal. The bold game was the only one which offered the vaguest possibility of success—a plan such as they had set themselves to carry out could only hope to succeed if it were executed in the same spirit of consummate cheek and hell-for-leather daring as that in which it had been conceived. And that was what Patricia Holm intended to do, starting in at that very instant.

Even so, sir and madam—that was the determination which was glowing like hot steel in Patricia's brain. Orace had gone off to deal with an engineer, and Orace could look after himself as well as anybody. Having laid out the engineer, he would repair to the rendezvous, and when the girl failed to put in an appearance, after a reasonable time, he would set out in search of her—incidentally disposing of any Tiger Cubs whom he encountered on the way. And, therefore, in a little while, there would be two vengeful people creeping about the ship and striking shrewd, secret blows at the enemy—here one moment, there the next, coming and going like wraiths, and leaving no more evidence of their passage than a Tiger Cub sleeping peacefully in the scuppers here and there. The girl guessed that Orace was still troubled with fears for her safety and doubts of her ability to pull her weight in the undertaking, and so, to save bothersome argument, she was going to take the bit between her teeth and leave him to fall into line behind—and, once she was started, he would have no

option but to do exactly that, for the pace would be too hectic to allow any intervals for discussion.

There is this about the thrill of action, the electric omnipresence of danger, and the necessity for keeping yourself keyed up taut and ready to make lightning decisions: it takes up all the time of all your faculties and holds your brain buzzing round and round that one sole pin-point of motive. Patricia was not callous. It wasn't that she had forgotten the Saint and gone gaily cavorting off on this new spree in a manner that would make you think that piracy amused her just as much as petting. It was simply that, having resolved to call the Tiger down to an audit of the ledger, the concentration which that task demanded would, until it was accomplished, leave no room in her mind for any of the thoughts which had inspired it.

And so, as she crept nearer to the end of the alleyway, Patricia's nerve was neither dulled nor unbalanced by any irrelevant considerations. She was just one hundred and thirty pounds of smoothly functioning Tophet, actuated by one grim purpose, waiting to detonate all over anyone who got in her way. And that road ran straight as an arrow's flight to a point directly over the Tiger's shoe leather. . . .

Men of the trade known to Orace as "pertaterstoors" may not be quite as other men are, but one specimen at least can be certified as possessing the gumption of ordinary men, for he heard the metallic note in Patricia's rapped command from the galley door, and, wisely, decided not to shout for help.

"Up with 'em!" crisped the girl. "Don't even open your mouth to gasp—I might think you were going to yell, and then your children would all be orphans!"

The man turned slowly, saucepan in hand.

He saw a slim, straight slip of a girl in a tight-fitting Jantzen that emphasized the calmly efficient poise of her body. Beads of salt water glistened on her brown skin in the lamplight, and her wet hair was swept back from her forehead in an unruly mop. At any other time, the cook, who was a connoisseur, would have been able to admire the perfection of her figure and the miracle of a complexion which could survive a two-mile swim and lose no jot of its beauty—in his somewhat coarse and practical fashion. But now his eyes were riveted on the blue-black gleam of the automatic which her small brown hand pointed so steadily at his middle; and, raising those dilated eyes from the gun to her face, he was able to appreciate only the firm set of her lips and the bleak purposefulness of her gaze.

"I'm getting tired of waiting." The words bit through the steamy air with the chilly menace of bright steal. "Stick 'em up. And jump to it!"

He started to raise his arms, and then the heavy saucepan catapulted from his hand.

The girl saw it flying at her head, and ducked instinctively. The pan thudded against the bulkhead behind her and clattered to the floor. She saw the man leaping toward her, and pulled the trigger twice.

She was braced up for the expected stutter of explosion, and its failure to materialize was a physical shock. In that split second of panic she remembered the waterproof holster of which the Saint had spoken, and which she had forgotten to provide herself with. Her fire had produced no other sound than the snap of the cap—the prolonged immersion had damped the cordite charge, and the gun on which she was relying

was no more use than a chunk of pig iron. The man was rushing at her with outstretched arms. . . .

Patricia had less than the twinkling of an eye in which to adjust herself to the sudden petrifying reversal of circumstances, but she achieved the feat. Hardly knowing what she did, she flung up her hand and hurled the useless automatic with all her strength. It struck the man squarely between the temples, and he went down in a heap.

The girl stood tense and motionless, wondering if anyone had heard. Her heart was pounding furiously. That had nearly been a knock-out in the first round! But it seemed that none of the other Tiger Cubs had been near enough to notice anything, and gradually she got her breath back and found her pulse throttling down to normal again.

The impetus of the man's onslaught had carried him halfway out of the door, and she had to drag him back into the galley. She picked up the saucepan he had thrown and chucked it in after him. Then she pulled the door to and turned the key on the outside.

The next move was undoubtedly toward the bridge. There would only be the skipper up there, unless Bittle or Bloem or perhaps the Tiger himself happened to have gone up to watch the loading from that point, and even against those odds the girl felt capable of keeping her wicket up, if she could only find a weapon. And once again her luck was in. As she went back up the alleyway, she observed a door standing ajar, and through it she glimpsed a row of rifles and cutlasses and revolvers ranged neatly in racks. The Tiger was carrying a good armoury.

She went in and selected a couple of revolvers. Boxes

of ammunition she found stacked up on the shelves below the gunracks. She loaded, and went out again, locking the door behind her and tying the key to her belt. That at least would worry the Tiger Cubs if it came to a straight fight.

The girl padded down the alleyway forward, her bare feet making no sound on the carpet. At the end, the alley she was following ran into another alley athwartships, and two doors faced her which she guessed would open into the saloon. On her right, a companion went upward into darkness. She would have seen the sky at the top of it if it had led on to the deck, and so she deduced that it led up into the deckhouse. Climbing, she came, as she had expected, into another alley, shorter and narrower than the one she had left, but the companion continued its ascent, and thus she emerged on the upper deck. Crouching under the shadow of a boat, she saw that she was just astern of the bridge.

The upper deck was deserted. She could hear the winch aft thrumming spasmodically, and thanked her stars that all hands would still be engaged in getting the gold aboard. But they couldn't take very much longer over it, and before they were finished and bustling about getting up anchor she had got to corral the skipper and the Tiger and any of the more mature Cubs who happened to be loafing about up on the bridge.

The bridge was built over a couple of big cabins. Certainly the Tiger would occupy one of those, and she marked them down for investigation later. But the first thing to do was to attack the bridge.

The bridge companion faced her. She gained it in half a dozen paces and went up.

There was a man leaning over the starboard rail.

The moonlight revealed the dingy braid on his uniform and the peaked cap tilted back from his forehead. He was gazing out to sea, chewing his pipe and wrapped up in his thoughts. If details are to be insisted upon, he was speculating about the riotous time he would have in Cape Town when he was paid off for the voyage. There was, for instance, Mulato Harry's place down by the docks—an unsavoury-looking joint enough from the outside, but provided with a room furnished in Oriental magnificence, to which only the favoured ones who were well provided with hard cash were admitted. In that room were delights for which the soul of Mr. Maggs hungered—better liquor than was served to the proletariat in the filthy bar beyond which the proletariat never penetrated, and decorative little pipes from which curled up thin wisps of seductive smoke, and houris of a more subtle loveliness than that of the painted half-caste women who frequented the better-known dives. Mr. Maggs visioned the orgy which the Tiger's money would purchase him; and, in his heavy and animal fashion, Mr. Maggs was a contented man, for he possessed the unlimited patience of the third-rate beast. And Mr. Maggs was stolidly champing over his dream for the umpteenth time since the Tiger had found him in a dockside bar in Bristol, and made the offer of a princely salary *plus* bonus, when something hard and round prodded Mr. Maggs in the spine and he heard a command which was not quite unfamiliar.

"Hands up!"

The order was hissed out very softly, but there was a sibilant menace permeating its quietness which made the experienced Mr. Maggs obey without question.

A hand dipped into his jacket pocket, and he felt his gun being deftly extracted.

"Now you can turn round."

Mr. Maggs pivoted slowly, and his jaw dropped when he saw the girl.

"You she-devil!" snarled Maggs, taking courage from the sight. "Sticking *me* up! Well, honey——"

He started to lower his arms. Two revolver muzzles jerked up and held their aim at his chest. The hands that held them were as steady as the hands of a stone image, and his keen stare could detect no trace of nervousness in the face of their owner. Mr. Maggs, wise in his generation, read the threat of sudden death in the girl's cold eyes, and stopped.

"Down the companion," said Patricia. "And don't try to get away or shout or anything. There's bound to be shooting sooner or later, and it might as well start on you."

Maggs complied to the letter. He was too old a hand not to recognize a bluff when he saw one, and he knew that this slip of a girl with the two guns wasn't bluffing. He went slowly down the companion and waited, and in a moment he heard her step down on the deck behind him, and again the revolver nosed into the small of his back.

"Now—where's the Tiger?"

He chuckled.

"You're wrong there, you! The Tiger isn't coming on this trip—he was persuaded not to."

"Where would you like to be shot?" she asked frostily.

"That won't alter it," said Maggs. "I tell you, the

Tiger isn't on board. I can't tell you why, and I can't tell you where he is, but the other guys arrived without him, and said he might come later or probably he mightn't come at all. You can ask Bittle."

She could not decide whether the man was lying or not, but she sensed that he was manœuvring for an opportunity to turn the tables on her.

"Where is Bittle?"

"The left-hand cabin."

"Lead right in there," said Patricia, and knew by the way he hesitated that he had lied, and that he had been hoping she would postpone entering that cabin and take him into the one on the right, where perhaps Bittle was.

He opened the door, and there she stopped him.

"Walk right in—and keep well away from the door. If you try to slam it in my face you'll get hurt."

He submitted perforce, and she followed him in and kicked the door to. She was then in a dilemma—a man could have tied Maggs up and left him, but Patricia could not trust herself to do that, since she would have no chance against him if he turned on her while she was unarmed, and she could not truss him up effectively with one hand. And she could hardly lock him in loose, when he could smash a porthole and raise the alarm as soon as she passed on. In fact, there was only one way to eliminate Mr. Maggs. . . .

Swiftly she reversed the revolver in her right hand, swept it up, and crashed it down with all her strength on the back of his head.

The next moment she was looking down at his prostrate form, and she found that she was trembling. To embark on an evening's amateur piracy—even to the

extent of holding up the skipper at the end of a gun—even to putting out a recalcitrant cook in fair fight—is one thing. To strike a man down in cold blood is another, especially when you do it for the first time in your uneventful life. She feared that she might have killed him, but a rapid examination showed that he was still breathing, though she reckoned by the vim she had put into the blow that he would have no interest in the entertainment for a long time. She regained her feet, considerably relieved.

"Pull yourself together, Patricia Holm!" she admonished herself. "This isn't a vicarage tea party—you can't afford to be squeamish. They'll do worse to you if they get you, so let 'em have it while you can!"

Now for Bittle. . . .

She locked Mr. Maggs in, and stowed the key away by a cleat, where it could be recovered later if required. Then she crossed to the other door, turned the handle noiselessly, and suddenly flung the door wide.

The cabin was in darkness. She searched for the electric-light switch, and the darkness was wiped out in a glare that half blinded her, but she was able to see that the cabin was empty. An open valise was on the bunk, and some clothes had been unpacked and lay strewn about. A faint odour of fresh tobacco proved that the occupant had not long been gone. Then an ash tray on the ledge of the disappearing wash basin caught her eye, and she discovered the origin of the smoky smell, for the cigar had only just been lighted.

Would Bittle have left his cigar behind him?

An indefinable suspicion of impending danger tingled up her spine like the caress of a thousand needle points of ice. . . .

Or did it mean that he would be back in a moment? If so, she was asking for trouble by keeping the light on and standing full in the blaze of it. Hurriedly she clicked the lever over, and darkness descended again.

She spun round with a start, and saw him at her shoulder, but he was too quick for her. He had caught her two guns, one in each hand, and torn them out of her grasp before she could move.

Chapter XVIII

THE SAINT RETURNS

BITTLE pushed the girl roughly into the cabin and slammed the door.

"Now let's have a look at you."

He was in his shirt sleeves, and the fact that he had loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar for comfort in the sultriness of the evening increased the ruffianly effect of his appearance. John Bittle was one of the men who are only tolerable when conventionally dressed. And his round red face was no longer genial.

His gaze stripped her from crown to toe, and the girl went hot under its slow significant deliberateness.

He stuck her revolvers in his trousers pockets, so that the butts protruded, and leaned against the door, folding his arms and smiling. His smile was introspective, and was not charming; and when he spoke again he did not bother to infuse any mellowness into his voice.

"Well, well!" he said. "So this is the immaculate Miss Holm! Forgive my surprise, but one hardly expects to find the young ladies of the aristocracy behaving like this."

"As one hardly expects to find Sir John Bittle in such company and such circumstances," she retorted.

He shook his head.

"There does happen to be a Sir John Bittle, but I am not he. I assumed his knighthood for the edification of

Baycombe; and now that we have both said good-bye to Baycombe I don't mind being plain John Bittle again."

"I'm delighted to hear," said Patricia scathingly, "that you're resigned to your plainness."

She wasn't letting Bittle think that he was getting away with anything, though in fact she was afraid for the first time in her life. He was master of the situation, and he knew it; and her only hope for the moment lay in bluffing him that she knew better.

"I trust you will also become resigned to it," he returned smoothly—"otherwise your married life will not be happy. You understand? My offer still holds good, which I think is very generous of me, though I'm afraid you have no choice. In less than an hour we shall be at sea, and this ship is under my command. I can only say that I'm very much obliged to you for turning up just when I feared I had lost you."

"You're assuming a lot," said the girl coolly.

His fixed smile did not alter.

"As a business man, I have no time to waste beating about the bush. You will marry me now, and there's an end to it. Maggs—the captain—can perform the ceremony quite legally. Incidentally, you should be grateful for my intervention. If I were not here—well, Maggs is a vindictive man, and I think he will bear you malice for the way you've just treated him. But I shall be able to protect you from the vengeance of Maggs, and in return for my kindness I shall expect you to be a good wife to me."

Patricia's lip curled.

"My good man," she said, "I'd die first."

"You won't," said Bittle mildly, and something in the cold certainty of his tone froze her like a bitter wind.

There was a Burberry thrown across the chair beside her, and she picked it up and slipped into it, trying to invest her movements with an insulting unconcern, ignoring his very existence.

"I was just leaving my cabin as you shepherded Maggs into the one next door," Bittle explained, gloating. "I guessed you would try to interview me next, but I felt that if I let things go according to your plans you would have me at a disadvantage—a position which could only prejudice me for ever after in my rôle of your lord and master. A man should never give his chosen mate a chance to despise him."

"Then, when you've chosen your mate," said Patricia, "you'd better go and live on the other side of the world —I should think that would help enormously, if she never saw you."

He leered.

"You're a spitfire," he said, "but I'll tame you!"

"You're a liar," said the girl. "You'll do what the Tiger tells you. I'd like to meet him, by the way. Will you take me to him, please?"

Bittle laughed, and drew himself up.

"I am the Tiger."

The girl looked him over contemptuously.

"I'll believe that—when tigers look like rats."

"You'll see," he answered, and looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I must leave you now. The cargo's nearly all aboard, and we'll be sailing right away. I hope you didn't hit Maggs too hard."

"Not hard enough, I'm afraid," she said calmly. "I'm afraid he'll live."

He shrugged.

"The second mate can navigate, though he hasn't a

ticket, and Maggs will revive later. *Au revoir*—Patricia."

In a moment she was alone, and she heard the key turn in the lock and his footsteps receding toward the companion.

She had no means of telling the time, for she had left her watch in the Pill Box. She spent a little while searching for a weapon, but she did not expect that he would have overlooked anything like that, and was not surprised when she failed to find one. Then she turned her attention to the porthole, but the opening was far too small for her to squeeze through, slight as she was. And that was all about it—she was fairly trapped.

She sat down and coldly reviewed the situation.

There had been no uproar of any sort, and so it seemed that Orace was safe. By that time he would be searching for her, and if she were lucky she might be able to communicate with him. She held herself motionless, to eliminate any sound inside the cabin, and strained her ears for any stealthy creeping past the door. She dared not run the risk of calling out, for it would be fatal to let the enemy suspect that she was not alone.

And, while she listened intently, she went on thinking. If Orace found her, what could he do? He couldn't release her, though perhaps he would be able to pass her a gun with which she could deal with Bittle on his return. But the onus of the adventure would rest almost entirely with Orace and Algy, and, regarded even in the most optimistic light, the odds against them were terribly heavy. She found herself daydreaming of wild far-fetched possibilities of victory, and pulled herself together with a kind of mental violence, for she knew that

that was a forerunner of despair—when practical schemes for winning out seemed so hopeless that one was forced, in a final effort to stave off panic, to imagine help falling from the skies. And, after a sternly practical inspection of the facts as they stood, the girl was compelled to admit that the chance of beating the Tiger now was pitifully small. . . .

Then came the feeling of unreality—the feeling that the whole thing was too fantastic to be true. And that, too, she recognized for a false comfort, and lashed herself out of it. That way also defeat lay—to sink into a torpid reverie and wait for awakening to put an end to the horror. No—this was no ordinary nightmare. She'd entered the regatta in earnest, and the tide was running all against her. But she must—must—*must* keep on hoping against hope, whipping all her wits into service, refusing to surrender. That was the only alternative to accepting her fate as Bittle or the Tiger dictated it. . . . Resolutely she shut out of her mind the contemplation of an end too horrible to vision in cold blood.

Time passed—she could not tell how long she sat there, listening for Orace and waiting for Bittle, wrapped up in her thoughts. But Orace did not come. Had he been caught? But there had been no sounds of excitement, even since her capture, and so it seemed that Orace was still at large, whatever he was doing about her disappearance. That was some consolation. By that time, too, Algy should have recovered, and perhaps even then he and Orace were at work. . . . So she brooded, until it seemed hours since Bittle had left her.

Then there stole in upon her senses a low humming

noise, not so much heard as felt. For a moment she was at a loss to account for it, and then she realized that it was the vibration of the ship's motors.

So the cargo was all aboard, and the Tiger was preparing to make his getaway. . . . But by now she had forced herself into a sort of dreadful passiveness. Abstractedly she sought for, and found, all the concurrent tokens of departure. She looked down through the open porthole, and saw two men standing by the small winch in the bows. Someone below her called an order, and the winch rattled into action. She listened to the clanking of the anchor chain, and the jangle of each link as it grated over the teeth of the winding drum hammered into her brain like the tolling of a knell. . . . Then she heard men crossing the deck outside. The footsteps ascended the companion, and she heard them moving about the bridge overhead. There were two men, and Bittle was one of them. He called down a perfunctory query—"All clear?" and one of the men forward looked back and said, "Aye, aye, sir!"

"Let her go," said Bittle, and she heard the tinkle of the engine-room telegraph.

The vibration swelled to a drone, and she saw the black contours of the coast begin to slide across her field of vision. Coincidently came the soft lapping of disturbed waters. . . . Another ring from the bridge, and the sea to port boiled whitely away in a growing smudge of moonlit milkiness. . . . Again the tinkle of the telegraph, and the ship commenced to forge ahead as the last glimpse of land slipped away and left her staring dully at the wide horizon. . . . The churning and splashing of their passage became more insistent. . . .

They were off—the Tiger had scooped the pool. . . .

The girl sank on to the bunk and covered her eyes. In that moment she tasted the dregs of defeat.

Bittle came down from the bridge. He went to the door of the other cabin and thumped on the panels. He shouted "Maggs!" several times, without, apparently, getting a reply. Then he crossed the deck and she heard his key in the lock.

She had composed herself by the time he had opened the door. He met the same acid, defiant stare, and felt a certain admiration.

"Still just as sure of yourself?" he asked, and she nodded.

"Quite—thank you."

He eyed her twistedly.

"You're plucky, but I'm afraid it's wasted. You know Templar's dead?"

"Mr. Templar's dead—yes. But the game goes on." She looked up at him steadily. "Even I may die. But there are others—you will never be able to say you're safe as long as there is a law, and decent people to fight for it. For a little while, you're winning, but in the end you can't win. Mr. Templar, after all, was only a pawn, and I'm no more than that myself. But even though you kill both of us, there are plenty of others to take our places—men who will never rest until they have led you to the gallows. Think of it, Bittle! Years will pass, and you will travel thousands of miles; perhaps you will change your name, and settle down at the other end of the earth; you will play your part, make yourself a respected and important man with all this money, and try to believe that the past can be forgotten. But in your heart you will know that nothing can be wiped out, and you will always be haunted by your fear. If you call that

a victory, Bittle, you've won—but I wouldn't change places with you!"

He was not impressed.

"D'you really think you can scare me so easily?" he said. "If you like, you can come out on deck and watch England fall behind us. You will never see England again—we have vanished into thin air, for all Baycombe knows. Only one dangerous man has been left, and by now he will have been shot—Templar's servant. Where is help coming from?"

"When did you shoot Orace?" she inquired. "He was very much alive when I left him."

She was wondering if Orace had, after all, been captured, but she was giving nothing away until she knew, and Bittle's reply reassured her.

"The Pill Box will be raided at two o'clock, and Orace will be killed—that has been arranged."

"Then you might give me a cigarette."

He proffered his case and watched her tap the gasper on her thumbnail, and he marked that her hands did not shake.

"And a match, please."

He held the light for her, and then she leaned back again and puffed a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Have you also arranged to kill Carn?" she questioned.

"Carn—that old fool? Why?"

"Detective Inspector Carn, of Scotland Yard—that old fool. He went into Ilfracombe this afternoon to collect his posse. He knows the Tiger! . . . They must have had a breakdown somewhere, and that stopped him arriving in time—but that only means that

by dawn the Atlantic fleet will be scouring the seas for you. I'll bet that surprises you, Bittle!"

She spoke in quiet, even tones, and the certainty that she wasn't bluffing hit Bittle between the eyes like the kick of a mule.

He bent and stared closely into her face, but she looked back at him without faltering. Incredulously, he searched for the least hint of wavering in her gaze, but found only a mocking amusement. Conviction forced itself upon him against his will.

"D'you mean to say Carn's a detective?" he said thickly.

"I do." Every syllable was a taunt. "And d'you mean to say the Tiger—that old fool—has had Carn living next door for months and never suspected him? . . . Really, you seem to be a very stupid lot!"

His face darkened, and for a moment she thought he would strike her. There was murder in his eyes.

Then he controlled himself, but he stepped back as though he had received a blow.

"Thank you for warning me—I'll be ready for them," he rasped. "But you—you'll never share the laugh. While I've got you for a hostage they don't dare to touch me. You'll save us all, my beauty!"

"My good man," retorted Patricia, with that glacial scorn which treated him as an offending flunkey—"I wouldn't lift a finger to help you if you were roasting in hell."

He bared his teeth.

"You'll change your mind when I set out to make you," he said.

He flung open the door.

"Bloem!"

He waited, fuming, and then bellowed again:

"Bloem! . . . *Bloem*—you blasted Dutchman! . . . Here, you, go and find Mr. Bloem and tell him I want to see him at once. Run!"

He slammed the door again and glowered down at her.

"My girl," he said venomously, "you're going to be sorry you didn't accept my offer the night I made it!"

"My man," she answered, "your humiliation will always be one of the pleasantest memories of my life."

"It'll be one of the last," he vowed.

He leaned on the door with tightly folded arms, glaring at her evilly, but after one glance of superb disdain she went on smoking and ignored him.

The interval was a long one, and his cursing impatience raged higher with every minute of it.

At last a man came across the deck and knocked on the door. Bittle jerked it open, and let out an exclamation.

"What the blazes——"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't find Mr. Bloem."

"Can't find him? You lazy swine—you haven't looked! The ship's small enough, isn't it? What in hell d'you mean?—can't find him!"

"Gawd's truth, sir. I looked everywhere, and Lopez and Abbot 've bin 'elping me. Mr. Bloem don't seem to be on board."

"Mr. Bloem *is* on board," snarled Bittle. "Go and look again—and don't come to me with any more excuses like that."

And then came a startling interruption, that made Bittle go white and sent the girl to her feet with her heart leaping madly, for from somewhere on the lower

deck aft rang out a cheerful hail that could have shaped itself in only one mouth, and that the mouth of a man who had died that afternoon.

"Ahoy, there, Bittle!"

Bittle shrank back, temporarily possessed by a superstitious terror. Patricia sprang forward, but he caught her and flung her on to the bunk with the strength of a maniac.

"Pat!" sang out that cheery voice. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Saint—— Ah, Saint, is that you?"

"Sure!"

Bittle wrenched the guns from his pocket.

"Get him—don't stand about staring like a lot of stuck pigs!" he screamed. "Go to the armoury—heel yourselves! . . . A hundred pounds to the man who kills him!"

The Saint's laugh pealed out as she had thought she would never hear it again.

"Can't you make it more than that, dearest cherub?"

And then Patricia saw him. He was standing up on the rail at the poop, and there were two men beside him. She thought at first that the third member of the party was Algy, until she saw that the limp figure which Orace was holding like a shield was fully dressed. She heard a rush of feet on the decks below, and four men emerged on the upper deck and ran toward the stern. They were carrying rifles—the quartermaster or someone must have had a duplicate key to the gun room.

Then the Saint stepped down, and there were three men clustered in a little group by the taffrail.

"Tell 'em to be careful how they shoot, Bittle,"

warned Simon. "This here sandbag we're sheltering behind is the long-lost Bloem himself!"

"Stop!"

Bittle had collected himself.

He seized the girl by the arm and dragged her out into the moonlight so that the Saint could see her distinctly, and he held the girl in front of him so that her body was between him and the Saint.

"Be careful how you shoot, Templar!" shouted Bittle. "Be careful even of what you say and do—because, unless you and your friends surrender within three minutes, I am going to kill Miss Holm with my own hands!"

Chapter XIX

THE TIGER

PRECISELY three minutes later, Simon Templar and Orace were led into the saloon under an armed guard.

"Good-evening, dear Bittlekins," murmured the Saint affably. "Fancy meeting you!—as the vicar said when he saw one of the leading lights of the parish Mothers' Union dancing at the Forty-Three. Sit down and tell me all the news."

Bittle smiled.

"We all make slips," he said, "but I scarcely imagined you would overlook such an obvious factor as Miss Holm."

"I was just hoping that you yourself might overlook it," explained the Saint. "I honestly thought you were slow enough on the uptake for that. Still, we all make our mistakes, as the bishop said, even the very youngest and most inexperienced of us—and very few mistakes are irreparable."

Bittle nodded slowly.

"Very few," he agreed. "I made a bad one when I presumed your death—but, as you see, that error has been rectified. Even now, Templar, you are a dead man."

The Saint let his gaze travel round the saloon.

"Quite comfortable," he admitted, "but I really thought heaven would be a bit more luxurious. Besides"

—he surveyed the six tough customers who had ranged themselves round him in a semicircle that fairly bristled with knives and revolvers—"these don't look like angels; and you don't, either, my pet, if it comes to that. Do you think I could have missed the bus and arrived in hell by mistake?"

His sodden trousers were shapeless, and the white of his torn shirt was marked with grease, but still, by the exercise of his inimitable gift, he was able to look debonair and immaculate. And, for all the apparently overwhelming odds against him, he retained his air of unshakable confidence. But this time Bittle could see no loophole in the trap in which he had the Saint, and he refused to be awed by anything so intangible as the Saint's assured bearing.

"Have they been searched?" he asked one of the guard, but it was Simon who answered.

"I gave up my gun when I surrendered."

"And kept your knife—I remember that trick," said Bittle.

He himself removed Anna, and by making a thorough examination he found also her twin sister strapped to the Saint's leg. The discovery pleased him.

"I'm not making any more mistakes, Templar."

"So glad!" drawled Simon. "May I have my cigarette case back, please? Anna and Belle aren't any use to anyone but myself, but the cigarette case is really silver—I won it in the Open Ludo Tournament at Bournemouth in '13."

Bittle examined the case, and, failing to find anything suspicious about it, returned it to the Saint, who replaced it in his hip pocket.

The Saint turned suddenly on his heel, and the guard

sprang back a pace and put up their weapons, and Simon laughed.

"Your men aren't very brave, are they?" he remarked. "I'm unarmed, and each of them looks like a travelling arsenal—but watch!"

He feinted at one of the tough-looking customers, and the man flinched away. The Saint tweaked his nose ungently, and, wheeling round, tripped up another man and sent him crashing to the floor. Bittle sprang up with an oath, reaching for his revolver, but the Saint turned back with a light chuckle and put up his hands.

"Merely a demonstration of moral superiority," he said airily. "Even now, you see, I can scare you!"

"I'll soon stop that," Bittle grated, furious at having let himself be alarmed by the exhibition, and pointed to one of the men. "Fetch a rope—we'll see what he can do when he's trussed up."

"Anything you like," said the Saint boastfully. "Houdini is my middle name, and knots mean nothing to me."

The rope was brought, and Simon's hands were tied securely behind his back. The man knew his job, and, since he was the gentleman whose nose the Saint had taken liberties with, he did not consider the prisoner's comfort at all. The cords bit savagely into Simon's wrists, tightened up by a violent hand, but the Saint only smiled.

"Mind you don't break the rope," he said solicitously.

The man knelt down to bind the Saint's ankles, but the Saint, without any haste or heat, put his foot in the man's face and pushed him over.

"If there's no objection," he murmured, "I'll sit down first."

He crossed the saloon nonchalantly and took one of the swivel chairs. Then he let the seaman tie his ankles together. The same brutal force was exerted there, and when the operation was complete the man straightened and deliberately struck Simon on the mouth. The Saint did not move, and the man spat in his face.

"I congratulate you," said the Saint in a low voice. "You are the first man that has ever done that to me, and I am pleased to think that before morning you will make the thirteenth man I have killed."

"That'll do," rapped Bittle, as the man raised his fist again. "Tie up his servant."

Orace clenched his hands and looked round belligerently.

"Cummernava try!" he challenged.

Orace was game enough, but there were men all round him, and he could only knock two of them flying before the rest were clinging to his arms and legs and bearing him, still struggling and swearing sulphurously, to the floor. He was trussed up even more comprehensively than the Saint, perhaps because his crude form of defiance was more understandable to the inferior mentalities of the guard; and then one of the men was sent to bring in the girl, and Simon braced himself up for the meeting.

Patricia walked into the saloon with her head held high, but her calm was not proof against the sight of the Saint's bruised face and the thin trickle of blood running down his chin from the corner of his mouth.

"Simon!" she sobbed, and would have run to him, but two of the guard clutched at her and dragged her back against the wall.

"It's all right, old darling," said the Saint urgently.

"Don't let the swine see you break down. . . . I'm not hurt. Just been in a vulgar brawl, and it's nothing to what the blister who did it will look like when I've finished with him. . . . Now, Pat, old thing, cast an eye over that nasty object across the way. It's old fat Bittle himself, and he's going to make a speech about his triumph—I can see it written all over the boil he calls his face."

Bittle nodded.

"You must confess," he said, "that I have some cause to be satisfied with the conclusion of our little rivalry."

"Conclusion my sock-suspenders!" snorted the Saint. "I haven't started yet!"

"In that case, Templar, you would appear to have sacrificed your chance for ever. . . . But your diagnosis, in a way, was quite correct—I was about to outline to you the programme which I propose to follow with regard to your immediate future."

"Careers for our Boys," quoth Simon irreverently.

Bittle clasped his hands across his stomach.

"Before we proceed with that interesting exposition, however," he said, "I think there are two members of the company who would like to be present." He turned to one guard. "Lambert, will you go and see if Mr. Bloem and Mr. Maggs have recovered sufficiently to join us?"

The man left the saloon, and there was silence for a moment. Presently Bittle said:

"While we're waiting, perhaps you'd care to teli me how you managed to escape?"

The Saint grinned.

"Nothing is easier. When I was an infant, a cele-

brated clairvoyant and cardsharper told me that I had been born under the sign of the Zodiac known to astronomers as Humpty Dumpty and to the lay public as the Egg. Taking his words to heart, I early applied myself to the study of the science of Levitation, in the hope of averting the doom which had been prophesied for me. I succeeded so well, by virtue of years of practice and self-denial and hours of fasting and prayer, that I can now back myself to bounce to almost unlimited heights. Consequently, when I fell into your little trap, I was able to fall out again, if you get the idea. I think that's the whole story—except that an aunt of mine once had an under-gardener whose nephew knew a man whose father had once shaken hands with a lady who remembered meeting a dentist in Maida Vale whose second cousin twice removed was the divorced wife of a Manchester stockbroker who once ate a pint of whelks with a lawn mower on Wigan Pier for a bet. In fact," went on Simon, warming to his subject, "we are a very distinguished family. Another aunt of mine had gout and a mother-in-law whose cook married a gas-fitter who——"

"Spare us your humour," pleaded Bittle wearily. "It doesn't amuse me."

"But it amuses me!—as the actress said on an auspicious occasion," said the Saint, and would have continued in that vein if Bloem and Maggs had not arrived at that moment.

Both looked much the worse for wear, and their heads bore abundant tokens of the cold water which had been liberally used in resuscitating them. In addition, Bloem's forehead was disfigured by a bruise which

was rapidly taking to itself all the brighter hues of the rainbow, and the way he glared at the Saint was not friendly.

"The compliments of the season, Mynheer," drawled Simon. "And who's the other little ray of sunshine, Mr. Chairman?"

"Our captain, Mr. Maggs," Bittle introduced that injured warrior suavely. "You have not met him before, Templar, but our dear friend Miss Holm knocked him out an hour or two ago."

"Delighted!" murmured the Saint. "She seems to have made a good job of it, Maggie—or did you always look like that?"

Mr. Maggs lowered.

"My name's Maggs," he blustered.

"But I shall call you Maggie," insisted the Saint. "It's more matey, and it suits you better. And really I didn't mean to be rude about your face. You've got a nice kind face, like a cow."

Mr. Maggs turned away with a growl, and stalked over to the girl. Then the Saint was afraid, and the veins stood out purply on his forehead as he wrestled with his bonds.

Maggs took the girl's chin in his thick fingers and tilted up her face, leering down at her.

"You might've killed me," he said—"hitting me like that. But I'll make you apologize later, and I like my apologies sweet."

"Sit down, Maggs," snapped Bittle.

Maggs still persisted.

"Give us a kiss to be getting on with, like a good girl."

"Sit—down—Maggs!"

Bittle was on his feet, and there was death in his hand. Grumbling, Mr. Maggs lurched into a chair and sat staring at Patricia in his ugly way.

Bloem went round to the chair opposite Maggs, but Bittle remained standing at one end of the table. The Saint sat at the other end.

Bittle paused for a moment, and the men grouped round the walls fidgeted into stillness. A macabre atmosphere of fiendish cold-bloodedness began to fill the room. It came from the hate-smouldering eyes of all those silent men, and it clouded malevolently behind the stocky figure of John Bittle. Bittle was posing at the end of the table, waiting for the theatrical effect of the gathering to tense up to a nerve-tearing pitch, and a sensitive man could have felt the silence keying up to the point at which unreasoning terror crowds in like a foul vapour. Seconds throbbed away in that pulsating suspense. . . .

The Saint cleared his throat.

"Rising to address this general meeting at the close of such a successful year," he prompted, "I feel—— Go on, Bittle. Declare the dividend, and make sure all your braces buttons are safe before you bow to the applause."

His gently mocking tones broke down some of the tension. He looked across at the girl, and she smiled back.

"I'm not taking any notice," she said in a clear voice. "He's only indulging his love for melodrama."

"Melodrama," replied Bittle, "is a thing for which I have an instinctive loathing. Yet, in a situation such as this, it is very hard to avoid overstepping the bounds of banality. However, I will try to be as precise and to the point as possible." He fixed his malignant gaze on

the Saint. "This man, Templar, whom you see, has elected to interfere in matters which do not concern him. By a succession of miracles, he has so far managed to avoid the various arrangements which we have made for disposing of him; but now, on the open sea, I hardly think he can escape. He has put us to great inconvenience, and I don't think anyone here has any cause to bear him any good will. While he lives, no one here is safe. I believe I am merely the spokesman of everyone present when I say that he must die."

He looked from face to face, and there was a mutter of assent. He looked at the Saint again.

"I indorse that verdict," he said.

"Blatherskite and brickdust!" said the Saint disparagingly.

Bittle continued:

"Then there is this man—Orace. He is also a man against whom some of you will bear a personal grudge. In any case, he is in Templar's confidence, and therefore I say that he too must die."

"Pure banana oil," jeered the Saint.

"Finally," said Bittle, "there is the girl. I propose to marry her myself, and Maggs will conduct the service as soon as the sentence has been carried out upon Templar and Orace." He picked up a revolver from the table and waved it meaningly. "If there is anyone here—Maggs included—who objects to that, he can speak now."

Nobody moved.

"Scat!" remarked the Saint.

"Is that all the protest even our redoubtable Mr. Templar can make?" Bittle sneered. "I'm disappointed—you've talked so much about what you were going to

do to all of us that I was expecting something interesting."

Simon yawned.

"Before I die," he said, "may I tell you my celebrated joke about a man called Carn? I wonder if you've heard it before? There was once a physician called Carn, but nobody cared worth a darn—if a man said 'By heck! That bloke might be a 'tec!' the others would simply say 'Garn!' And yet it happens to be true. Isn't it odd?"

"Patricia"—Bittle rolled the name out with relish—"has already told me that story. If it is any comfort to you, I can assure you that it will only make me more careful of her health. The same ultimatum which brought you into my power will, I think, discourage Carn. It will certainly be an awkward dilemma for him, but I imagine that his humanity will triumph over his sense of duty."

"If that is so," said Simon slowly, "I think he will be sure to give the order to fire—and blow this ship and everyone on board to smithereens."

Bittle shrugged, and signed to one of the men whom Orace had floored.

"We will start with the servant," he said.

"Yah!" gibed Orace. "Yer a lotter thunderin' 'eroes, you are! Undo me 'ands, an' cummaht on the deck, any sixeryer, an' I'll showyer wotter rough-'ouse feels like!"

Beads of perspiration broke out on the man's face as he slowly raised the revolver.

"Sorlright, sir," Orace ground out. "Don' think I care a damn fer wot ennyer these bleedin' barstids do. . . . Shoot, yer maggot! Wotcha skeered of? 'Fraid I'll bite yer? . . . Git on wiv it, an' be blarsted to yer!"

"Wait!"

The Saint's mildest voice scarcely masked the whip-lash crack of his command, and the man lowered his gun. Bittle turned to him.

"Have you, after all, something to say before the sentence is carried out?" he inquired ironically. "Perhaps you would like to go down on your knees and beg me to spare you? Your prayers will not move me, but the spectacle of Mr. Templar grovelling at my feet would entertain me vastly. . . ."

"Not this journey," said the Saint.

Already he had worked the cigarette case from his pocket and cut through the cords which had bound his hands, though it had been a long and difficult feat. Now he had slid forward in the chair and tucked his legs well back, and he was patiently sawing away at the ropes which pinioned his ankles.

"You see," said the Saint, in the same leisured tone, "we are all, as you recently observed, liable to make our mistakes, and you have made three very big ones. You must understand, my seraph, that your own loathing for melodrama is only equalled by my love for it, and I think I can say that I staged this little conversazione simply for my own diversion. It seemed to me that this adventure ought to finish off in a worthily dramatic manner, and if all goes well you'll have to bear the agony of watching enough melodrama concentrated into the next few minutes to fill a book. Things, from approximately now onward, will go with a kick strong enough to set the Lyceum gasping. How does that appeal to you, beloved?"

"I'll tell you when I hear," said Bittle brusquely, but the Saint declined to be hurried.

"This speechifying," he remarked, "will now come

from the principal shareholder, so please don't fluster me. Sit down and listen—you've had your turn. . . . Well, here we all are, just like a happy family, and exactly where I wanted you all. I grant you I took a big risk, but I had to do it to get the scene nicely set and the audience all worked up and palpitating in their pews. Also, it happened to be necessary to pass a little time before the moment was ripe for trotting out the big thrill. Now, if you're ready, I'll send up the first balloon." The Saint paused, and smiled from Bloem to Bittle. "Where is Harry the Duke?"

If he had detonated a charge of thermite under their feet he could not have produced a greater sensation. The men looked from one to another, suspicion and rage and fear chasing over their faces deliriously. For a space there was an electric silence, while the Saint leaned back in his chair, smiling beatifically, and felt the last strand of rope break away from his ankles.

Then the storm broke loose. Bittle reached forward and pawed at Bloem's shoulder frenziedly.

"What's happened to Harry?" he snarled.

Bloem jumped to his feet and struck down Bittle's hand.

"Leave me alone!" Bloem's nerves were raw and jagged. "It isn't my fault—you never asked me, and you've been too busy talking yourself for me to tell you." He glared round at the Saint. "That meddling puppy got me—I was just taking Harry some food—the door was open, and he got me. I know he'd found Harry!"

Bittle sprang at the Boer like a wild beast, his face contorted with demoniac fury, and Bloem reeled back from a vicious blow. In an instant Bittle had grabbed

a couple of revolvers, and was holding them threateningly in his quivering hands, and Bloem cowered sullenly back from the flaming passion that blazed in Bittle's eyes. Bittle, in that towering paroxysm, would have murdered the other where he stood, given the slightest provocation, and the Boer knew it.

"Search the ship!" Bittle shrilled. "You—all of you! Get out and search the ship!"

"Why bother?" asked the Saint in his silkiest manner. "If you want to find Harry the Duke, my little ones, you'll have to go all the way back to Baycombe!"

Bittle swung round.

"Meaning?" he prompted dangerously.

"Meaning that when I'd dented old Bloem's cranium, I went into the cabin and found Harry the Duke, *alias* Agatha Girton," said Simon. "We had quite a long chat. He told me how Agatha died years and years ago, at Hyères, and Harry took her place. The Tiger found him out—and that was another bad bloomer. You'd have thought any sane man would have been satisfied with a cool million; but no, the Tiger was so greedy he had to blackmail Harry for Miss Holm's money, and that made Harry sore. Harry's a dangerous man when he's sore, and he tried to kill the Tiger. Then the Tiger saw what a mug he'd been, and decided to take Harry off on the cruise and dump him over the side with a couple of firebars spliced to his feet, which is a very effective way of killing a man and has the advantage that it leaves no incriminating corpses about. Harry was able to tell me quite a lot of interesting things about Tigers and Tiger Cubs. Then I told him a few things *he* didn't know, and after that we shook hands—he was really a sportsman, because he did try to put the kibosh on your

hanky-panky with Miss Holm, whom he was rather fond of—and I let him slip over the side and swim back to Baycombe on condition he wrote an anonymous letter to Carn telling him all those things about Tigers and Tiger Cubs which we'd discussed." The Saint looked almost apologetic. "And, therefore, one and only—thank God—Bittle, I can assure you that the police will come aboard with the pilot if you so much as show the tip of your bowsprit outside Cape Town harbour, and the Mounted will be camped all around T. T. Deeps in case you manage to sneak in by the back way. Rather upsetting, isn't it?"

"You, at least, will not laugh much longer," said Bittle, and put the muzzle of one of his revolvers in the Saint's face.

"Half a sec.!" Simon's voice ripped out like a gunshot, and Bittle hesitated with his finger tightening on the trigger. "While I'm being so communicative, you might as well hear the rest of the yarn—it may help you, though I doubt it. Let me tell you your second mistake. I've got another stiff one ready to shoot at you! This is mostly Orace's story, but he won't mind my cribbing it. Orace, you know, hasn't been wasting his time. Orace went below and laid out your engineer and put on his clothes. You spoke to him yourself, and never guessed—I'll bet that makes you hop! Then I arrived, and also mistook Orace for the genuine article, and I'd nearly killed him before I found out my error. Orace and I knew enough about motors to obey the telegraph, and we were the ones took this bateau out for you. After we'd finished I made Orace take off the overalls, so that you wouldn't suspect anything; but the real engineer is still locked up below, and he must be

pretty cramped and peevish by this time! But that's not the whole yarn—not by a mile!"

Bittle had lowered his gun as the Saint talked on, for it was dawning upon Bittle that the Saint had an even bigger trump card yet to play. Prince of bluffers though the Saint might be, Bittle could not believe that he could bluff for his life in such a casual manner. The Saint smiled all the time, and he was smiling in such a way as almost to invite the others to doubt his word, yet every now and then he handed them out one perfect gem of verifiable fact to shatter their illusions and force them back to credulity. He used his facts as pegs on which to hang the decorations with which his egotism compelled him to embellish the tale, but for all that those facts stuck out as stark and uncontrovertible as a forest of spears. And all the time Bittle could sense that the Saint, in his mild and lingering way, was working up to an even more devastating bombshell. What that bombshell was going to be Bittle could not divine, but the conviction was borne in upon him that a mine of some sort was going to be exploded somewhere in his vicinity. And therefore he waited for the Saint to have his say, for he was hoping to minimize his danger by letting the Saint forearm him against it.

Simon was gazing through a porthole at the dark horizon, and something that he saw there seemed to please him. His smile trembled on the verge of laughter, as at some secret jest, and when he went on there was a trace of excitement creeping into his voice.

"Orace and I," said the Saint, "have brains, and Orace used to be a Sergeant of Marines, so he was able to provide the raw material for our ingenuity to work on. Before we started the picnic, we put your bilge pump

out of action and opened up one of the scuttles in the keel. My nautical knowledge is very scanty, and I'm not sure if that's the way a sailor would describe the gadgets, but I expect Maggie will tell you what I mean. Anyway, a lot of water started pouring in, and we legged it out of the way without waiting to see what happened next. Still, I notice that we seem to have lost a lot of speed, and unless my eyes are failing I should say that we had developed what I understand is called a list to starboard, so I suppose the old tub really is going down. Check me up if I'm wrong. . . ."

Maggs started up, and the others looked wildly about them. The Saint had spoken the truth. The list had developed very slowly at first, so that no one had noticed it in their absorption in more tempestuous things, but now that the Saint had called their attention to it the fact was indisputable.

Suddenly there was a stampede for the door.

Bittle leaped forward, raving like a maniac, and quelled the panic. He fought in between the terrified mob and the door, and held them off at revolver point. Then he himself opened the door and looked out.

The ship had lost way considerably, and was now heeling over so much that it was difficult to walk on the sloping decks.

Bloem was swaying drunkenly toward the door.

"The gold!" he blubbered. "The gold! . . . It'll sink! . . . Bittle, make them get the gold into the boats!"

"You're a fool!"

Bittle pushed the man back—he was easily the calmest of them all. His rage had simmered down, now, out of visibility, but it gleamed behind his small pale blue

eyes like the molten lava which oozes down the sides of a volcano when the eruption has died down. Both his guns went up.

"You beat me in the end, Templar!" he shouted. "But I can see that you never enjoy it." Like one possessed, he kicked aside a man who stood in his line of fire. "Laugh now, Templar!" he babbled. "It's your last laugh!"

And the Saint chuckled, throwing back his head joyously, for he had seen the final shock which he had allowed for dovetail in according to schedule.

"Put up your hands, Bittle!"

The voice cracked into the room like a bared sabre.

Bittle turned and saw the man who had appeared in the doorway, and his revolvers thudded to the carpet from his nerveless fingers.

He shrank away into the farthest corner, and his face had gone gray and horrible.

Algy took a step into the room, a heavy automatic in each hand, and the men retreated before him. He swept them with hard, merciless eyes.

"I think you all know me," said Mr. Lomas-Coper, in the same metallic voice.

He looked at the girl, and read bewilderment in her face.

"I am the Tiger," said Algy.

Chapter XX

THE LAST LAUGH

"THINGS have gone very badly," said the Tiger. "As Bittle said, Mr. Templar, you have beaten us. I bear you no malice. Perhaps it was ordained that it should end like this. You need not be afraid that I shall kill you, as that man would have done—that would be profitless. I might still have won, if I had had a fair chance, but the men I trusted double-crossed me. Now the ship is going down, and all my work is lost. I can fight no more. Fate has been against me from the beginning, and I am very tired."

He passed a hand across his eyes. The fatuous pose which went with the character of Algy Lomas-Coper had fallen from his shoulders like a discarded cloak, and it was an ordinary man who spoke. More than that, it was a broken man. There was something which filled the Saint with a sneaking sense of tragedy about this sudden transition from the effervescent Algy to the grim, weary figure of the Tiger facing the end.

"But you——"

The Tiger's burning gaze raked over Bittle and Bloem and Maggs like a searing iron. Once again the Tiger's voice took on that biting tang of steel, and the men cringed from the lash of it.

"But you—you treacherous dogs, you perfidious

scum, you abject rats, you shabby, contemptible, paltry vermin—against you I do bear malice. I came down to meet you on the quay—do you remember?—and you shot me down without a word. It was only a graze, but it stunned me, and to make sure you shot me again in the body as I lay there. I found the bullet afterward, and there was the bruise on my chest under my heart to prove it. But I always wear a bullet-proof waistcoat —you couldn't know that. I lived, and swam out here with that girl to win back what was mine. I might have done it, but I am not such a good swimmer as I thought I was, and it took me a long time to recover after I got on board. So I only arrived in time to hear your speeches, Bittle, and hear Templar tell you how he had beaten you."

The Tiger looked out at the sea.

"We are sinking quite slowly," he said. "There will be plenty of time for all of you to put off in the boats. I mean *you.*" He looked around at the guard. "You at least are not traitors—you have simply obeyed the orders of these three men, and it was not your place to question them. I have no grudge against you. You are only the tools. You may go."

The men stared at each other and at the Tiger incredulously, as though they could not believe their ears. The Tiger stepped out of the doorway and waved them through, his lips curling contemptuously. One by one they crept furtively past him, and, as they gained the deck, made a rush for the companions to the boat level, casting fearful backward glances as though they expected him to repent of his decision and call them back. At last they had all gone.

The Saint stood up and stretched himself, and the

ropes fell away from his wrists and ankles. He even had time to enjoy and appreciate the sensation which his escape act caused to everyone present.

"Quite a good curtain," he remarked.

He looked at the Tiger, and smiled ruefully.

"I congratulate you, Algy—you had me guessing all the time. Well, it's been a good dust-up. . . . And now may I undo Orace?"

"Certainly."

Simon walked up to Bittle and took Anna and Belle from the man's pockets. In a few quick slashes Orace was free and chafing his hands and stamping up and down to restore the circulation.

Then the Saint replaced the knives in their sheaths and went over to Patricia. He took her in his arms and kissed her; and, the reaction coming at last, she clung to him like a child, and the Saint was murmuring soothing and meaningless things to stop her trembling.

"Now, Mr. Templar," said the Tiger, "you may take your friends and get away in one of the boats. I am staying behind to settle accounts with *my* friends."

Simon passed the girl over to Orace.

"I'll follow in a moment."

Patricia went, with Orace's protecting arm around her, but the Tiger stopped them at the door and took the girl's hand.

"You will never be able to forgive me," he said, "and I am only thankful, now, that the power to do you any harm was taken away from me. I am a bad man, and I have blood on my hands, but you are the first woman who ever tempted me to forget my chivalry."

He kissed her hand, and then Orace led her away.

The Tiger looked at Simon.

"It is a queer whim," he said, "but I should like to shake hands with you."

"You make it difficult for me," answered the Saint. "I'm rather sorry you've taken things so sportingly. But I'll shake hands for that very reason."

The Saint held out his hand and smiled. . . .

Crack!

The bullet actually grazed Simon's arm, and he saw Algy's eyes glaze over suddenly. The Saint was still holding the Tiger's hand. A great silence followed the reverberation of the shot, and in that silence, without a word, the Tiger swayed and toppled to the floor. He lay there on his back, and above his heart, in the dark stuff of the bathing costume which he still wore, a darker stain was spreading. . . .

The Saint bent over him, but the man was dead.

Simon took in the situation out of the corner of his eye. Maggs and Bloem were crouching back against the bulkhead, but Bittle stood up, still holding the smoking revolver which he had snatched from the floor while the Tiger's attention was distracted.

The Saint straightened up, and in the same movement Anna flashed from her sheath to his hand and whistled across the saloon like a humming flake of light. It drove into Bittle's exposed wrist, severing flesh and sinew and grating on the bone, for the Saint could throw knives with unerring accuracy. Bittle's hand relaxed limply. He dropped the revolver and flinched back, clawing at the knife which still hung from his arm.

The Saint was standing across the Tiger's body with both the Tiger's automatics trained on the little group.

"Treacherous to the last, Bittle," said the Saint.

"But I saw you, and for that shot you will hang at Exeter in about three months' time."

And at that instant the ship was flooded with a blinding light. Over the Saint's shoulder, the three men could see, far astern, the blinding eyes of two powerful searchlights which converged on the ship.

"That will be Carn," said Simon, without taking his gaze from his prisoners, and at that moment Orace and Patricia returned, sick with fear, for they had heard Bittle's shot.

"Only scratched me," the Saint reassured them. "But he got the Tiger."

He passed the automatics over to Orace and went out on deck. The pursuers were still a long way behind, but they were creeping up fast, and the ship could not have hoped to escape them, with those great beams of light turning darkness into day.

"This is the end of the adventure," said the Saint, with his arm round Patricia's shoulders. "But, by the grace of God, it is also a beginning."

It was some minutes later that he remembered an important detail—he was reminded of it by seeing the sea swelling up alarmingly close to the starboard scuppers, and in the next second he nearly lost his balance as the deck canted farther over.

The Saint sprinted astern, sliding and stumbling all over the place. The girl saw him disappear down a companion from the poop, and waited, clinging to a handrail, for balance was becoming more and more difficult. It was some time before he came back, and by then the pursuit was barely a quarter of a mile away.

The Saint went into the saloon and found Orace braced against the table for support, but still dutifully

covering the now terror-stricken trio. Simon used up the remains of the rope which had been employed on Orace and himself, and at the end of the performance Bittle and Bloem and Maggs were trussed hand and foot beyond all possibility of escape. The Saint and Orace between them dragged the men out on deck.

By then the ship had stopped altogether, and rolled low and sluggishly in the oily billows. The pursuing boats were closing in on either side, and the Saint climbed to the upper deck and stood in the full glare of the searchlights. In a moment Carn's voice hailed him through a megaphone.

"What's happened? Are you all right?"

"Marvellous!" Simon called back cheerfully. "We've got three prisoners and one corpse waiting for you."

"I'll be on board in two minutes," said Carn, and was as good as his word.

He came up the rope ladder, and the Saint met him on the deck.

"You look as if you'd been wrecked," were his first words. "We can talk later—better hurry up and get everybody off before she goes down."

The Saint surprised Patricia as much as Carn.

"Wrecked nothing! I told Bittle and Co. we were going down, but we aren't. Orace and I just fixed the pumps and left 'em running so as to run all the water out of the port ballast tank and fill up the starboard one! I've just reversed the arrangement—see? She's evening up already."

Simon showed Carn all the exhibits, and the detective was staggered.

"That Tiger had us all skinned," he said.

They sat in the saloon and exchanged notes. Carn

had been lucky enough to find a couple of new submarine-chasing motor boats lying at Ilfracombe at the end of a trial run, and he was able to catch them with his posse when they were on the point of returning to Bristol.

"All the same," he remarked, "I should have been too late to be any use to you. I take my hat off to you, Saint."

"What was Lapping in this?" asked Patricia.

She told him about her interview that afternoon, and the detective smiled.

"Lapping knew all about me, of course," he said. "And I told him all about how the Saint was trying to cut me out. I expect he thought you were having a dab at pumping him for the Saint's benefit."

The Saint did not consider himself bound to say anything about Harry the Duke. Before he let Harry go back to the past of Agatha Girton, he had warned him about the dangers of private feuds, and Harry had seen reason—the Saint had a means to control him.

"You can tell Lapping that Harry the Duke has decided to forgive him," he said enigmatically.

Carn was mystified, but Simon let him be puzzled, and passed on.

"Now we're all satisfied," murmured Simon. "You've got the villains of the piece to take home with you, and I've got the gold."

Carn goggled.

"I'd forgotten that—I was so worried about you and the Tiger," he said, and the Saint chuckled.

"I hadn't forgotten it. I waited to start any ructions until they'd got it all aboard for me—I couldn't bear to think of all my work being wasted." The Saint looked steadily at the detective. "Shall we cry quits, Carn?

You know I'm straight, and I want to work this hooker across to New York and return the ducats to the Confederate Bank's agents and collect my reward. It'll just make enough for me to retire on comfortably. And you get all the kudos out of the affair for nabbing the Tiger Is that a bet?"

Carn held out his hand, and they both smiled.

"Miss Holm goes with you, I suppose?"

"I'll ask her," promised the Saint. "It'll be easy—these motor ships are dead simple to run, and Orace has as much expert knowledge as we need. America's a big place, anyway. We can't miss it altogether, and as soon as we strike the coast we'll be able to find out where we are, and probably get a navigator. We'll only be able to run in daylight, of course, so it won't be a quick passage —but I can think of worse honeymoons!"

One of the motor boats had already been sent back in search of the crew which the Tiger had allowed to go, and Algy and the three prisoners were taken down into the other boat, and the armed men who had swarmed all over the ship returned to their own little craft.

Carn was the last to go.

"Good-bye, Saint, and a good voyage," he said.

"May you fill many prisons in the course of a prosperous career," returned the Saint piously.

It has already been recorded that Orace was in the habit of calling his master every morning with a cup of tea, and commenting on the beauty of the weather.

On a certain morning Orace came up a companion with a cup of tea in each hand. He paused outside a door, and put the cups down so that he could knock. But he

did not knock. Instead, he scratched his chin and argued within himself long and earnestly. Then he picked up the cups again and went back to the galley and drank them himself.

Only one thing could upset Orace's ingrained sense of discipline, and that was his ingrained sense of the proprieties.

THE END

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